DISASTER NATIONALISM

THE DOWNFALL OF LIBERAL CIVILIZATION

RICHARD SEYMOUR

'What thinker would you bring to an earth on fire? You would not want to leave Richard Seymour at home' —ANDREAS MALM

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The Downfall of Liberal Civilization

Richard Seymour

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Introduction

One of the lessons of the Hitler period is the stupidity of cleverness. How many were the expert arguments with which Jews dismissed the likelihood of Hitler's rise, when it was already as clear as daylight … According to the clever people, fascism was impossible in the West. Clever people have always made things easy for barbarians, because they are so stupid … That cleverness is becoming stupidity is inherent in the historical tendency.

– Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*[1]

I.

The new far right is enthralled by images of disaster. 'Death panels'. 'White genocide'. The 'great replacement' of whites by immigrants. The Jews who 'will not replace us'. 'Cabals' of Satanist paedophiles and communists. 'Islamisation'. 'FEMA camps'. Immigration 'invasion'. 'Traitors' in office. Climate hoax. 'Plandemic'. Chinese-style communism. An election stolen by the deep state. A nation under attack by left-wing terrorists. 'Civil war is here, right now.'[2] Shots of adrenaline.

Such scenarios segue swiftly into violent exhortation. 'I can't sit by and watch my people get slaughtered. Screw your optics, I'm going in.' Storm the capitol. 'Armed march on capitol hill and all state capitols.' Come 'armed with rifle, handgun, 2 knives and as much ammo as you can carry'. 'Do not let them disarm someone without stacking bodies.' Bring 'handcuffs and zip ties'. 'Fuck zip ties, I'm bringing rope!' Cross the Rubicon. Declare a dictatorship. Invoke the Insurrection Act of 1807, deploy the military and national guards, and put down the leftist conspiracy. Invoke Executive Order 13848 and investigate the election fraud. The corrupt cabal, as a bestselling QAnon book had put it, must 'be permanently eradicated from the earth'.[3] Hail Trump.

The pseudo-insurrection in Washington, DC, on 6 January 2021, intended to stop a supposed theft of the presidential election and restore Trump to power, was fantasy putschism minted by online disinfotainment: Caesarism for the QAnon generation. But it was not the last of its kind. In the space of less than a year, an alleged coup attempt by the neo-Nazi Reichsbürger movement in Germany was thwarted, supporters of Brazilian president Jair Bolsonaro stormed government buildings in the hope of triggering '*intervenção militar*' (military intervention), and the Russian paramilitary Wagner Group marched halfway to Moscow to force out the military leadership they blame for betraying the war on Ukraine.

In every case, the pseudo-insurrection was justified by conspiracist paranoia. The Reichsbürger movement contends that the Federal Republic of Germany is not a nation-state but a corporation created by the Allied powers. Bolsonaro's supporters believe that the pro-business centrist Lula is a communist. Yevgeny Prigozhin, leader of the Wagner Group, argues that the war on the 'hohols' (a racist slur for Ukrainians) is being sold out by an ethnically impure leadership (he refers to General Shoigu, from an ethnic Turkic group indigenous to Siberia, as a 'Tuvan degenerate'). More telling still, in most cases the dirty work of the coup was supposed to be carried through by the 'good guys' in power: Trump, Putin, or the military. In a similar way, riots and mob violence against the remnant Israeli left under Netanyahu before and during the genocidal assault on Gaza were in support of those in power.[4]

Mass violence in other forms, each motivated by its own fantasies of doom and redemption, has been enabled by national governments. In the Philippines, the line between police murders of drug addicts and volunteer death-squad killings is deliberately opaque. The anti-Muslim pogroms in India are systematically enabled by police, politicians and courts. In Israel, the pogroms carried out by settlers in the West Bank could not take place without the involvement of the Israeli army, whose officers and reservists are often embedded in the settler population. In each case, a vaguely insurgent energy has been unleashed, not against a decadent status quo, but in defence of it against fantasies inspired by the queasy sense of normality catastrophically slipping away. 'Trump's agenda is about making America a normal country,' tech billionaire Peter Thiel explained. 'Germany, but normal' was the slogan of the far-right Alternative für Deutschland in 2021.[5]

These would-be putschists are for the most part politically inexperienced volunteers mobilised online. The organised core of those who stormed the US capitol building were heavily armed ex-military and ex-police officials who were inured to the 'moralizing violence' that Michael Mann describes in the formation of classical fascism, and who also therefore displayed some tactical intelligence. However, most participants were new activists disproportionately drawn from the downwardly mobile business and professional classes.[6] Like far-right voters in Brazil and the United Kingdom, it was not deprivation but a trajectory of decline that fuelled their radicalisation to the right. They had done well out of the boom years, only to be hurled into debt and even bankruptcy. They were at risk of being relegated to the status of ordinary, struggling humanity.

Organised by online networks, the ersatz insurrectionists in the United States, Brazil and Germany were in no way intellectually or logistically prepared for the coup d'état for which they yearned. Their actions resembled nothing so much as armed versions of the online shitstorm – which in no way mitigated their seriousness. The 'red-pilled' and red-pill-curious turned out in droves on 6 January 2021 hoping to materialise their fantasy of a 'Great Awakening', a 'storm', or a 'day of the rope'. In a snap poll taken after the 'insurrection', before the ideological deflections blaming the event on 'Antifa' took root, some 45 per cent of Republican voters said they supported the action.[7] To linger on the garish idiocy of these ideologies and the fusion of media infantilism and commercial cynicism that helps them circulate would be to succumb to the compensation of feeling superior. It would miss their explosive psychological power, and their potential to bring about a far more dangerous cataclysm. Graves have been filled with those who 'knew better'.

II.

If you think any of this wonkiness is going to deal with this dark psychic force of collectivized hatred that this president is bringing up in the country, then I'm afraid Democrats are going to see some very dark days.

– Marianne Williamson[8]

Disaster nationalism, the apocalyptic nationalism that has swept several far-right leaders to power and is even now readying more breakthroughs, has mounted a spectacular critique of political orthodoxy.

The law of political gravity was expressed by Bill Clinton's aide James Carville during the 1992 election: 'It's the economy, stupid'.[9] The slogan summed up a whole world view: if voters were treated as consumers, their rational choices would keep politics in the consensual middle ground. Competent politicians could secure just enough prosperity, however staggering the inequalities became, to blunt persecuting passions. An example of this type of thinking was summed up by Benjamin Friedman, in *The Moral Consequences of Economic Growth*: 'Economic growth—meaning a rising standard of living for the clear majority of citizens—more often than not fosters greater opportunity, tolerance of diversity, social mobility, commitment to fairness, and dedication to democracy.'[10] This axiom, drawn from classical political economy, has never described real human behaviour. And now rightist politicians have proved that millions will gladly, sometimes self-consciously, hurt what they are told is their own best interest: income, employment, health and sometimes even their lives can be sacrificed for the chance to destroy an enemy.

The convection cells of this storm have long been gathering in plain view. As early as 1996, the Hindu supremacist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) became the biggest party in the Indian parliament four years after its illegal mob-led demolition of the Babri Masjid. The same year, Pat Buchanan's far-right campaign did far better than expected in the US Republican primaries. In 1998, the young anti-communist nationalist Viktor Orbán, legatee of Hungary's interwar ruler Admiral Miklós Horthy, swept to power in Hungary's general election. In 1999, Jörg Haider's Freedom Party came second in Austria's legislative elections. There followed a string of surges for far-right campaigns, as the disasters of war and then financial ruin accelerated the deeply rooted unhappiness, distrust and social resentment already circulating in these societies, directing it towards Muslims and migrants. The neo-fascist Front National came second in France's 2002 presidential race, the anti-Muslim Pim Fortuyn rose to 17 per cent of the vote in the Dutch 2002 general election, and the BJP swept the elections in Gujarat following an anti-Muslim pogrom. There followed breakthroughs for the Belgian Vlaams Blok, the Swiss People's Party, the British National Party and, in the United States, the birth of the Tea Party movement.

The outbursts of demotic violence accompanying the catastrophes of war and depression, though not new in type, were elevated in wild and whirling winds of neighbourly hate. Alain Bertho documents a surge in worldwide terror events since the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and a crescendo of civic violence since the 2008 financial crash. Lone wolf murders increased 143 per cent between the 1970s and 2000s (by 45 per cent in the United States, and by 412 per cent in fourteen other countries affected). By 2016, the number of people killed in lone wolf attacks was already more than double what it had been in the 2000s: a contagion spread mimetically, on gamer forums and far-right social industry channels. White supremacist violence has surged since 2010, while mass shootings were occurring in the United States at a rate of more than one per day by 2019. The growth of rightist paramilitaries could be seen from Eastern and Central Europe to the United States, alongside apocalyptic religious ideologies and millenarian conspiracy cults, from the wildly popular 'Left Behind' series to QAnon.[11]

The rise in political violence, even as other forms of violent crime fell over thirty years, Bertho argues, indicates a severe crisis of political action. Since 2008, this crisis has been exacerbated by the sudden, acute awareness of inequality, inflamed by the aggravation of 'horizontal inequalities' such as racism in the United States or communal oppression in India. As Gudrun Østby of Oslo's Peace Research Institute documents, political violence is strongly correlated to the magnitude of these sorts of inequalities, especially when democratic mechanisms don't work to mitigate them.[12] And the more that already weak democratic systems degenerate and become incapable of absorbing these crises, the greater the risk of violent explosions. It was this brooding, simmering, violent landscape that produced a string of breakthroughs for a motley association of far-right demagogues, networks and parties, from Orbán's landslide in Hungary's 2010 parliamentary elections, to Narendra Modi's victory in the 2014 Indian general election, Britain's hard-right driven exit from the European Union (Brexit) and Trump's ascent to the White House in 2016, Jair Bolsonaro's shock win in Brazil in 2018, and the rise of Italy's far-right Lega Nord to government in coalition with the populist Five Star Movement in the same year.

Incumbency has been extremely forgiving to these forces. In 2019, Narendra Modi was re-elected in India, with a 6 per cent swing in his favour, on an agenda of stripping citizenship rights from Muslims and violently crushing opposition in occupied Kashmir. The ruling coalition

added 57 million votes to its total, raising it to 229 million votes. Modi's approval rating, even after his promised laws led to mass protests by the opposition and officially condoned pogroms against Muslims, is still over 70 per cent. Also in 2019, a campaign of Brexit nationalism handed the UK's Conservative Party 44 per cent of the vote on an 'outsider', anti-Westminster platform, after almost a decade in office. In the Philippines, the midterm elections gave President Rodrigo Duterte's party, PDP-Laban, 56 per cent of the vote after two years of death squads and vigilante murder of thousands of drug addicts. Duterte's approval ratings have long hovered around 90 per cent. His anointed successor, Bongbong Marcos, son of the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos, won the 2022 general election with 59 per cent of the vote: significantly higher than Duterte's 39 per cent in 2016. In 2022, Orbán's party, Fidesz, saw a nearly 5 per cent swing in its favour despite the opposition parties backing a single candidate. Other far-right parties, too, appear to be on the brink of a breakthrough. In France, far-right presidential candidate Marine Le Pen has twice made the second round of the presidential elections, scoring 33.9 per cent in 2017 and rising to 41.5 per cent in 2020. In Italy, the Lega Nord has been overtaken as the main far-right party by the Brothers of Italy, which flaunts its association with the country's fascist past. After the September 2022 general election, it was the largest party in Italy's parliament and formed a government in alliance with the Lega Nord, Forza Italia and a small centre-right party 'Us Moderates'. In November 2023, two new far-right leaders ascended to power, as the rightist 'libertarian' Javier Milei won the presidency with 55 per cent of the vote, on the basis of a campaign of culture war against the left, and the far-right Islamophobe Geert Wilders's Party for Freedom gained the biggest share of the vote, 23 per cent, in the Dutch general election.

In this long view, the defeat of Trump in 2020 and Bolsonaro in 2022 would appear to be predictable oscillations in the general pattern of ascent. In fact, though Trump repelled more people than he attracted in 2020, his base expanded by over ten million votes: many of these votes were racked up in Democratic 'strongholds' like Miami-Dade County in Florida, the Rio Grande valley in Texas and deserted, declining and depopulated parts of the rustbelt as well as deep blue counties containing big cities like Milwaukee, Detroit and Philadelphia. Trump increased his vote in counties with the highest rates of unemployment, and among almost every demographic but white men, including Muslims, Latinos and black men. For this reason,

despite the damage to his reputation caused by the abortive coup, he is the Republican candidate in the 2024 presidential elections. As of this writing, opinion polling has him two points ahead of his likely rival, Vice President Kamala Harris.[13]

What took place on 6 January 2021 was a momentary ingathering of the American elements of this storm, catalysed by an apprehension of civil breakdown. The intensifying ecological crisis, manifested in severe wildfires, storms and a long-predicted pandemic, accelerated the existing mood of social fear. The United States, ill-led and ill-placed to cope due to its dysfunctional, privatised health infrastructure and scant welfare system, left millions to their own devices as Covid-19 spread. In the ensuing panic, there were outbreaks of survivalist prepping, a surge in gun ownership among first-time buyers anticipating civil war, shortages of essential goods leading to the breakdown of precarious civility and the highest levels of homicide for decades.

America's nationalist right sought explanations for the crisis within their Manichaean terms. The pandemic had to be the work of a rising Chinese superpower threatening America's self-confidence. Social distancing had to be the work of an insidious communist or Satanic plot working in the upper reaches of government. When the sadistic police killing of George Floyd provoked the largest protest movement in US history, the white suburbs saw Marxists unleashing anarchy. America's militias, white nationalist motorcycle gangs and armed vigilantes – Patriot Prayer, Proud Boys, Three Percenters, Boogaloo Boys and new groups springing up overnight such as Utah Citizens' Alarm – took to the streets. In some cases, police, evidently relieved to discover that their traditional support in civil society had not vanished, openly welcomed or cooperated with the vigilantes.[14]

When wildfires erupted in Oregon, vigilantes took control of the streets, turned guns on journalists and swept the area looking for 'Antifa' terrorists whom they, and some senior police officers, blamed for the blazes. Finally, as the election drew near, the Republican Party let it be known that the collapse of civilization was afoot, the election was being stolen, the suburbs were under attack and communism was pulling the strings. The incoherent pastiche of conspiracist bricolage, hallucinatory anti-communism, lurid theories of radical sexual evil and theological millenarianism that spanned the public sphere from message boards to the

White House explained all: the cracks and strains of civilization, the diminished self-assurance of the United States, the sudden frights and shocks of a world in crisis. Here was a local manifestation of what Christian theologians call 'kairos': the contraction and intensification of time.

These ruptures are not isolated events. They are too consistent over time, and too global, to be explained by local factors such as the backlash of a fading white supremacy, or Russian troll farms, or 'bad actors' spreading disinformation. They are part of a longer political cycle in which we can see what Gramsci referred to as 'the molecular accumulation of elements destined to produce an "explosion"'.[15] It is useful to distinguish between what the historian Fernand Braudel described as the event, the cycle and the *longue durée*.[16] The event is the familiar subject of the daily news and adrenalised social media feeds. The *longue durée* describes an underlying structure of human behaviour that is sustained for centuries, such as capitalism or colonialism. When we think of *longue durée* of the present, we're thinking of the way those structures keep repeating certain patterns – economic crisis, political chaos, violence – over time. This is one of the reasons why the 1930s seem such a rich metaphor for us: there are arresting similarities between the Great Depression following the 1929 stock market crash, with its tumultuous political fallout, and the Great Recession following the credit crunch.

The medium-term duration, the cycle, describes a period of some decades in which a set of social changes or conflicts germinates, develops and matures. Examples of a cycle would include the industrial revolution (1760–1840), the European civil war (1914–45), or the era of neoliberal globalisation (1980–2008). Political outcomes over the last few years tell us what kind of cycle we're entering. Amid the decomposition of the old establishment, and the comparative weakness of leftist upsurges, we're entering a cycle of nationalist revanchism. The long-standing pathologies of cruelty and deprivation built into daily life, a version of what environmentalist Rob Nixon calls 'slow violence', have erupted into spectacular violence.

It *isn't* the economy, stupid. It isn't even physical survival. In India, the Philippines, Brazil and the United States, pogroms, death-squad populism, far-right militias and police and paramilitary violence are the driving force of nationalist success. They offer not growth, but the chance to destroy a neighbour. Isn't this what happens as civilization falls away?

III.

Hitler massacred three million Jews … there's three million drug addicts … I'd be happy to slaughter them.

– Rodrigo Duterte[17]

This thumbnail sketch deliberately does not start by describing the rise of Trump, Modi, Duterte and Bolsonaro as a takeover by 'strongmen', 'authoritarians' or 'fascists'. The gravity-defying ascent of right-wing nationalists is of enormous importance. Their techniques of online celebrity, their cynical gaming of stalemated political systems and their politics of cruelty have been widely and justly studied. The major states in which they have won office – India, the United States, the Philippines and Brazil – are among the world's most populous. Together, they comprise over 2 billion people.

Though the 'strongman' tendency is real, these rulers are far-right celebrities, not despots. They have been propelled to power by electoral means, not by the military or paramilitaries. They have tended to conserve the majoritarian electoral system rather than trying to overthrow it. With the exception of Modi, whose grip on Indian public life is bolstered by a mass party (the BJP) and a paramilitary Hindu nationalist movement (the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, RSS), they don't have a strong civil base on which to rely. The conditions of their rise are negative: the stalemate of parliamentary institutions, the declining authority of the old establishment and the breakdown of social life (as documented, in the United States, by Robert Puttnam and Theda Skocpol).

It is common to compare their politics with fascism, particularly in American bestsellers about Trump. Historical fascism, however, was the product of a world long gone. In Europe, it was the product of a class civil war raging from Russia to France, turbulent processes of modernisation and urbanisation, racial tyranny in the form of segregation and colonialism, and pressures towards world war. That garrisoned, highly stratified world is gone, even if movements like Black Lives Matter are urgently raising awareness about its violent afterlives. Today's disaster nationalism is not, with the exception of the Israeli far right, colonialist. The allure of imperialism for fascist movements is its vindication of race and violence as principles of life, in its affirmation of counter-democratic hierarchy, in its

promise of reconstruction through what Bismarck called ‘blood and iron’ (Blut und Eisen) and in its promise of spiritual meaning achieved through an encounter with death. Today’s far right has a much more ambiguous relationship to imperialism: while many American soldiers have been radicalised on the frontlines in Iraq and Afghanistan, the institutions of US imperialism at least are seen as being too ‘woke’ and complicit in the ‘globalist’ project.

Nor does disaster nationalism make any claim to revolutionary anti-capitalism, as fascism did before taking power. To the contrary, it suggests that the problems of capitalist development – in rising middle-income countries like the Philippines, India or Brazil, as much as in declining powers like the United States – can be overcome by dispensing with human rights laws, climate controls, parliamentary bartering and enfeebling international agreements. Its leaders, from Trump to Modi, frequently represent themselves as hardheaded, macho corporate autocrats capable of knocking heads together and ‘getting things done’. Muscular capitalism is their weak utopian prospectus.

This new far right may be ‘post-fascist’ as Enzo Traverso argues, or it may represent a spectral imitation of fascism as Samir Gandesha suggests.[18] I think disaster nationalist leaders are pathfinders for a new type of fascism, because in a manner of speaking we are always *pre-fascist* as long as the conditions for fascism have not been abolished. But whatever emerges will not be cosplay of the 1920s and 1930s. Apart from anything else, the fascist experience did not begin and end with the interwar crisis. According to Rick Saull, the distinctive far-right model of politics, combining paramilitarism and charismatic leadership, can be traced to 1848 and the backlash against the revolutions that swept Europe in that year. The popularisation of irrationalist, anti-democratic nationalism can likewise be traced to the latter half of the nineteenth century. Arthur Rosenberg, writing shortly after Hitler took power, observed that before fascism became a party-state it had to be a ‘mass movement’ rooted in the feelings of millions. Before it was a mass movement, millions had to be infected with völkisch, racial-nationalist ideas. If interwar fascism is to be the historical benchmark against which we are measuring the new nationalism, then it would be appropriate to begin where fascism begins. It begins, in the words of philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guatarri, as a ‘molecular’

uprising, with microfascisms fizzing away in masses of people. We are, today, in the early days of a new fascism.[19]

The appropriate model for analysing the current phase of nationalist politics is not, therefore, the 'strongman', the military dictatorship or the party-state. It is the contagious outbreak: the 'brown plague', as Daniel Guérin called it. (It was partly from Guérin's observations of the nature of fascism in Germany that Deleuze and Guattari derived their concept of microfascism.) In today's terms, the diffusion of lone-wolf murders and mass shootings, of DIY vigilantes, networked militias, conspiracist witch-finders and pogromists can be called a social contagion.

An innovative theory of social contagion was developed towards the end of the nineteenth century by the French sociologist Gabriel Tarde. The 'transmission of movement from one body to another', he wrote, took place first in the microrelations formed below the radar of representation. It was at that point neither conscious nor cognitive. A fashion trend, or a microfascism, might begin with an involuntary, happenstance process of encounter between two nodes in a network, sparking a desire-event. From there, the desire spreads in a molecular flow of 'imitative rays', challenging coded beliefs and values, forcing adaptation to a new fashion, producing new hybrids. Thus, the novel virus: social invention. Since Tarde's work, research into social and emotional contagions has verified that transmission processes often occur below the radar of consciousness. People in conversation, for example, tend to mimic and synchronise their movements without thinking about it, adjusting to new stimuli within 125 to 200 milliseconds. In the same way, emotional states tend to be synchronised in part through the minute cues of facial feedback.[20]

The problem is that, while it is possible to see how these subconscious processes might unfold in the hyper-celerity of the internet, social contagions do not spread without some conscious reflection. Indeed, the very notion of a social contagion is nothing but a charming metaphor which, by treating social trends as though they were similar to viral particles, allows theorists to abstract away from the intentions of uptakers to focus on the mechanisms for transmission. Once intention is brought back in, it is clear that there are thresholds for uptake. In his work on social contagions, Damon Centola distinguishes between 'simple' and 'complex' contagions. A simple contagion, like a virus or a marketing idea, has a low threshold for 'adoption' and transmission. Contagions like this spread

fastest through widely distributed networks with lots of ‘weak ties’, for example on the internet. Complex contagions, like social movements, have higher thresholds for adoption. They require potential adopters to think intensely about the cause, the costs of participation and their existing values. What’s more, for most people it requires approval from peers. As Doug McAdam and Ronnelle Paulsen point out in their work on civil rights, the decision to participate in a movement depends on the feedback we get from ‘a significant subset of [our] relationships’. A contagion like that spreads fastest in a network like a geographically based community, where there is a lot of redundancy in the network: meaning, lots of people know the same people. That is in fact how most social movements have spread, in geographical waves. As Centola puts it, ‘While simple contagions spread most effectively when bridges are long, complex contagions depend on bridges that are wide.’[21]

Disaster nationalism, for all the complexity of the ideas and moods it involves, spreads as though it were a ‘simple’ contagion: finding its major pathways in communications networks rather than neighbourhoods or political gatherings. Indeed, from ‘lone wolf’ manifesto to ‘fake news’ story, it is self-consciously memetic. For example, Anders Behring Breivik, the author of the original ‘lone wolf’ manifesto – in fact, a pastiche of materials cut and pasted from right-wing websites, autobiography, masculinist self-help and apocalyptic fantasy – described his murders as publicity for his manifesto, enabling its uptake. Subsequent manifestos, self-published, have borrowed from Breivik and have been feverishly circulated on alt-right forums by lone wolfish packs.

Every successful social contagion, whether it is a meme, a fashion accessory, an exciting new gadget or a political campaign, follows an s-curve pattern in its diffusion. Uptake is initially so slow as to resemble stagnation. Then there is a moment of acceleration and take-off. Finally, the spread levels off, before reaching its upper limit, known as the ‘asymptote’. The violent accelerations noted above pinpoint the upward slant in the s-curve of diffusion, the moment when the contagion is taking off. That began long before the recent political ruptures.

If civic life is far from vibrant, how does the contagion spread so quickly? How do masses ‘spontaneously’ find their way to these ideologies when they have little organised support in civil society? The implication is

that the threshold for uptake of these ideas is lower than we might have assumed, or it has been systematically lowered.

IV.

The sacrificial system that binds American citizens has a sacred flag at its center. Patriotic rituals revere it as the embodiment of a bloodthirsty totem god who organizes killing energy.

– Carolyn Marvin and David Ingle, *Blood Sacrifice and the Nation: Totem Rituals and the American Flag.*[22]

Why, if there is a crisis of civilization, are so many working to hasten the end? The apocalyptic fantasies of disaster nationalism, I suggest, tap into a pervasive ambivalence about civilization which necessarily includes a hatred for all that is civilized, and a submerged desire for it to fall apart, as well as a need to be reassured that the disaster will all be made good in the end. This, as catastrophe novels, apocalyptic movies, 'end times' infotainment and now disaster nationalism suggest, is highly profitable. It accumulates both capital and souls.

In 1929, as the onset of the Depression was about to catapult the Nazis to power, Sigmund Freud was working on a way to explain such tendencies. In a short but extravagant work of pessimistic metapsychology, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, he argued that for all its benefits, civilization also makes us sick. We must give up too many erotic and aggressive satisfactions in the name of neighbourly love and civility, which does not come naturally, and the burden of which is unhappiness. If this were not redeemed by material advantages making our lives easier, Freud suggested, it would lead to a serious disturbance. The curative effects of decivilization, as millions let go of their respectable, politically correct selves and embraced their vindictive, self-defeating nastiness with pride, could only end in yet another explosion of the kind that had previously made Jews the scapegoats of Europe.[23]

Freud's narrow psychological focus on sexuality and aggression probably led him to underestimate the burdens of civilization, and the importance of their uneven distribution: class society breeds resentment,

envy, spite, anxiety, depression and rage. His more radical peers, such as Wilhelm Reich and Erich Fromm, attempted to probe further into the familial and capitalist structures of modern civilization and the underground emotional lives supporting fascist outbreaks. Later, psychoanalysis would be used by Octave Mannoni and Frantz Fanon to explore the dark, decivilizing impact of colonialism.

What unites the seemingly senseless and random outbursts of individual and collective violence in recent years is another aspect of modern civilization: the nation-state. The popularity of nationalism is, in a way, extremely odd. We are often told that what most people care about are 'bread and butter' issues. Yet the nation is a political abstraction which gains heartfelt support from millions of people who want utterly different, conflicting things. The nation has been an object of worship, conceived of as a god or goddess, so that nationalism may be thought an idolatrous religion. The theologian David Ritchie goes so far as to call it a demonic religion which, in the United States, has conquered Christianity 'through the power of seduction'. Nationalism is powerful in part because it is so politically ambiguous, including everything from anticolonial nationalism to Scottish civic nationalism to Hindu ethno-nationalism. It has a long history of association with the far right but has also grounded the political projects of the democratic left. It can be expressed in everyday forms, what Michael Billig calls 'banal nationalism', and in extravagant symbolic events such as football tournaments.[24] It is so pervasive that it is usually taken for granted.

Yet the history of nationalism is far from banal. In its origins, it was a civilizing process, a way of ordering the turbulent process of drawing masses of people into coexistence under the same political, religious and economic rule. And as a civilizing project, it embodies many of the contradictory tendencies that Freud identified. The earliest germs of nationalism, as the historian Anthony Marx shows, appeared in the context of fervent apocalyptic expectation, amid religious civil war and the fear of triumphant anti-Christianity. Nationalism was, at its inception, obsessed with subversive conspiracy, from the witch hunts of the English Civil War to the American revolutionaries' hunt for treason. Modern nation-states were founded, as Heather Rae observes, on forced conversions, suppression and 'massive displacements', often in the context of war. Among these traumatic events were the expulsion of Moriscos and Jews from Spain, the

outlawing of French Protestantism and the flight of the Huguenots, the violent 'population exchanges' between Greece and Turkey at the beginning of the twentieth century, and the communal massacres during the partition of India and Pakistan.[25]

As violent as nationalisation was, in the early modern era it was intended to stave off a far more feared collapse. The nation-state was supposed to unify peoples, to the extent that their rulers sought to suppress even the memory of social conflict. French absolutism demanded that the St Bartholomew's Day massacre, in which mobs of French Catholics massacred Protestants, be treated as though it never happened. English Restoration necessitated an Act of Indemnity and Oblivion to pardon crimes committed during the Civil War.

Nationalising the masses did not, however, eradicate civil conflict. It gave conflict a new expression. The forging of nations in war defined them against an external enemy. Colonisation, indentured servitude and slavery, from Ireland to the Americas, from India to the Caribbean, defined the nation against its inferiors – who, lacking nation-states at that stage, were said to be beyond law and civilization. Finally, nations usually had their internal inferiors (the exploited) and enemies (the repressed). While the lower classes could be policed and seduced, religious and ethnic minorities were the object of demands for forced conversion and assimilation, if not expulsion or death. These processes of coercion, moral persuasion, and exclusionary violence were combined in the under-studied twentieth-century phenomenon of anti-communist witch hunts and massacres, which usually fell hardest on unpopular minorities.

As repressive as this new civilization could be, it could also be extremely permissive of those who tormented the nation's enemies. A white man with money in the antebellum United States could not only own black people as slaves but could do almost anything to them. A Russian gentile could massacre Jews in a pogrom with a high chance of impunity. In the Amazon basin, as Sir Roger Casement documented to his alarm, the Peruvian Amazon Company could hunt, chain up, flog, murder, rape and enslave the Putumayo Indians without consequence. In Australia under British rule, Sir Arthur Gordon found 'men of culture and refinement' talking of both 'wholesale butchery' and the 'individual murder of natives, exactly as they would talk of a day's sport, or having to kill some troublesome animal'.[26]

These exercises in personal omnipotence were woven into rituals of national, ethnic and racial supremacy in which millions could feel some participation. W. E. B. Du Bois, writing of antebellum slavery, described how low-paid white workers derived a compensation for their subordination, a 'public and psychological wage', from the fact that they had a share in mastery. They were able to vote, were treated with relative courtesy, and received deference and submission from black people whom they were permitted to insult and abuse. Lynchings were 'a sort of permissible Roman holiday for the entertainment of vicious whites'. Corey Robin, describing the innovation that this represented in reactionary thought, calls it a 'quintessential form of democratic feudalism' because it offered ordinary people a share in mastery. As taxing as modern civilization can be, then, it offers compensations of superiority. And these compensations, for those who accept them, also work as a spurious justification for violent inequality, a felt proof of its inevitability: everyone always kicks down. And, even with these inequalities, nationalism promises unity. It says: we are all in it together, the people and the state are one.[27]

Disaster nationalism appears when such unity is no longer plausible, and when the compensations of nationalism are threatened. The apocalyptic threat, from this point of view, is not plague, wildfire or ecological catastrophe. It is the liquidation of social distinction. The nationalist fear of 'gender ideology', from Eastern Europe to Latin America, is a fear that men will become women. The fear of 'Antifa' and Black Lives Matter is a fear that, as historian David Starkey once complained, the whites are becoming black. The fear of 'communism' is the fear that the rich, and even the moderately affluent, will become paupers. And this chaos is threatened by 'cultural Marxists' and 'critical race theorists' who defame the nation-state by insisting that its dark history, such as slavery in the United States, is relevant today. When living standards are being squeezed and livelihoods rendered more precarious, this loss of distinction is widely experienced by those who have hitherto felt valued by society as a massive impoverishment of being, tantamount to the downfall of civilization. A downfall that can only be described in terms of emotionally compelling parables about 'white genocide' or elite child abuse. And against which terror, disaster nationalists offer a curative decivilization: violent restoration, followed by laughter and forgetting.

v.

For all its violence, the emotional register of disaster nationalism is often surprisingly upbeat. ‘The good days are coming,’ promise the Hindu nationalists. ‘Winning,’ promised Trump. So much winning. There is much talk of pride: national pride, white pride, male pride, Christian pride, Hindu pride, the Proud Boys. As though nationalism were a modern self-esteem movement. As though nationalist voters were secretly heartsick with sadness, shame and self-loathing, and were desperate for conversion, for both political and personal change.

There is ample evidence for collective dysphoria. It is a ‘cold world’, as the writer Dominic Fox puts it, a world increasingly ‘voided of both human warmth and metaphysical comfort’. The means by which this distress is detected are clumsy and inadequate: happiness surveys which chart falling life satisfaction, World Psychiatric Association data showing depression rising as inequality rises, life expectancy reduced by growing numbers of ‘deaths of despair’ (from alcohol, drugs or suicide), trust indices showing social life becoming more paranoid and hostile, diagnostic data showing pervasive mental illness, research disclosing that each new generation is less sociable and more lonely, economic data showing declining life chances and downward class mobility. Depression, which reached plague proportions during Covid-19, was already endemic in much of the world. In 2017, the World Health Organisation noted that the global prevalence of clinical depression had increased by 18 per cent between 2005 and 2015. It had become the leading cause of disability in the world. Intriguingly, some studies suggest that while civic pride corresponds to higher ‘subjective well-being’, ‘ethnic nationalism’ appears to correlate with lower subjective well-being.[28]

What is behind this plague of depression, loneliness and ‘deaths of despair’, and how do such emotions become politicised by salvific nationalism? In part, societies have become more unhappy as they have become more unequal. Rising inequality intensifies the perceived threat to income status, especially among those higher up the class hierarchy. It makes failure toxic, the downward plunge that much steeper. This is part of a comprehensive change that has taken place over the last forty years. Neoliberalism, the name of that change, is often misleadingly called ‘free market fundamentalism’. But neoliberals were never opposed to the big

state. What they opposed was the threat posed by the age of mass democracy to the sovereignty of markets and investors. They wanted to use state policy to reform human beings, wean them off their ill-founded belief in equality and their tribal notions of solidarity, and accustom them to the law of universal competition: ‘to change the soul’, as Margaret Thatcher put it.[29]

This is a paranoid system. From the neoliberal point of view, there is no such thing as the ‘public interest’. Anyone claiming to uphold it is a hypocritical, power-maximising bureaucrat, or a parasite on the taxpayer’s teat. There is no such thing as ‘freedom from want’: this is a lie perpetuated by layabouts and privileged state clients. There is no such thing as ‘society’: those who talk of society are disguising the pursuit of their own rational self-interests. There are only competitors operating under more or less fair rules. Neoliberalism’s founding precept could be ‘they’re all out to get you’.

This state of universal competition gave rise to informal ideologies of social Darwinism: an emulous culture of ‘winners’ and losers’ which made pop heroes of cutthroat opportunists like Trump, and villains of welfare recipients. In any class society, as the sociologist T. H. Marshall suggests, we understand ourselves through comparison with others. Neoliberalism massively raised the stakes of such frantic status-checking. And this ‘death by a thousand social comparisons’, as psychologist Oliver James put it, became toxic at just the point that previous ‘some-ones’ were at risk of becoming ‘no-ones’.

Ironically, the blizzard of data about depression resembles the experience of depression: it represents the world, as Fox puts it, in a kind of disfigured ‘objectivity’. The facts stand before us, but they are drained of any passion, or any relationship to us. Ubiquitous misery is represented as a series of variables to be governed, ideally through the promotion of a bourgeois lifestyle entailing exercise, good diet, mindfulness, medication and self-care. The depressed, for the purposes of concern-scold governments and corporations, are charged with taking better care of their ‘cognitive capital’. None of this is working to turn back the plague of depression. Since modern dysphoria manifests as ‘a generalised deflation of desire and capability’, as William Davies puts it, to be told to buck up, challenge negative thoughts and be cheerful often only makes it worse. In the forms of self-medication that the really miserable prefer, moreover –

opioid addiction, violence, alcoholism – self-care is indistinguishable from self-harm. The cure is slow suicide.[30]

Disaster nationalism offers another remedy, which is neither happiness nor self-medication. The far right has historically rejected happiness as an extension of liberal political economy. It was, sneered Mussolini, not true well-being but a degradation of humans to the status of cattle. The far right's preferred model of spiritual revival was the adventure of war, with millions marching together towards an enlivening encounter with a disaster they could kill, excited and aroused by the prospect of death. As Julius Evola put it months before Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia (against 'Negroes and other colonial insects' as Evola would call them), the individual's achievement of heroism in war, 'even if it is the final moment of his earthly life, weighs infinitely more on the scale of values than a protracted existence spent consuming monotonously among the trivialities of cities'.[31] Disaster nationalism is not always about to rush off to war, though in Kashmir and Gaza it certainly thrives on the opportunity to enforce the nation's moral boundaries by killing enemies. But even where it doesn't, it harnesses the insecurity, humiliation and miseries of people from across classes to a revolt against liberal civilization, with its pluralist and democratic norms. It offers the balm, not just of vengeance, but of a sort of violent reset which restores the traditional consolations of family, race, religion and nationhood, including the chance to humiliate others. Hence the inflationary idiom of 'anti-woke' nationalism, in which even mild, clumsy efforts to develop an inclusionary language are received as an existential threat. The goal is not simply to tweak the nose of the liberal superego but to reinvigorate life by introducing a powerful shot of violence, subordination and death.

This cure, feel-good pogromism, the 'red pill', easily outguns the happiness industry with its hopeless remedies of unlearning bad thoughts or zapping a supposed genetic disposition to depression with drugs. The therapy and drugs silence the cries of the afflicted, while disaster nationalism gives them something to cry about. Disaster nationalism links an already pervasive anxiety to a series of phobic objects (Muslims, communists, globalists, Jews and so on). For those confronting the demons in their heads, it names a worldly demon which can be assaulted. It arouses anxiety, only to momentarily relieve it with a shot of confidence and a thrill of collective hate. Among the crowds chanting 'build the wall', or 'death to

the Arabs', or 'Jai Shri Ram', the collective tightening and release of muscles, and the secretion of group hormones, work as an antidepressant. Following the state-orchestrated anti-Muslim pogrom in the Indian state of Gujarat in 2002, for example, the state's chief minister, Narendra Modi, spoke at a series of 'Hindu pride' rallies. He told the crowd: 'There are people bent upon destroying Gujarat.' But, he added, 'if we raise the self-respect and morale of five crores [fifty million] Gujaratis, the schemes of Alis, Malis and Jamalis will not be able to do us any harm'.[32] The scheming Alis, Malis and Jamalis in question were the state's Muslim minority, who had just been victims of a pogrom.

Modi offered his supporters self-respect through the enactment of what Freud called 'the blindest frenzy of destructiveness', realising their most extreme 'omnipotence-wishes'. As the psychoanalyst Tad DeLay says of the Proud Boys, their motto may as well be: 'Yes, I know I'm a fuck-up, but this group gives me strength.' The group bonds around anxiety and morale-boosting cruelty. It congeals around what the theologian William Connolly calls the 'underground resentments' circulating in class societies, and around its punitive 'ethos of existential revenge'.[33] But no amount of violence can staunch the anxiety, just as no amount of killing spiders will cure arachnophobia because the spider is not the real source of fear. The more the enemy is crushed, the less it appears to solve, and the more helpless one is in the face of anxiety. Disaster nationalism thrives on this vortex.

VI.

L'état d'urgence pour faire oublier les tas d'urgences. *(The state of emergency conceals a multitude of emergencies.)*

– French popular graffiti during the Nuit debout protests in 2016[34]

Disaster nationalism flourishes on, and manipulates, the profound unhappiness accumulated in the era of peak liberalism. It has radicalised the racism, authoritarianism, sadism and paranoia already abroad. And though it militates against hallucinated catastrophes, it does so in a world in which real catastrophes – recessions, wildfires, floods, tsunamis, pandemics – are

becoming more common and more deadly. According to the World Economic Forum, the rate of 'natural' disasters in 2019 was three times that in 1989.[35] The most recent, the Covid-19 pandemic, plunged the world into a deeper recession than the Great Recession of 2008, though the recovery was faster thanks to extensive state interventions.[36] And because today's nationalists can neither address the multiplying crises of capitalist civilization nor do anything but inflame the anxiety fuelling their phobic crusades, they can only escalate.

Disaster nationalism, I have argued, is not yet fascism. Yet there hasn't been a better time to be a fascist since 1945. The new nationalism provides the ideal milieu in which inchoate fascist forces can thrive. Among the Trump-supporting mob that stormed the Capitol building were men with Nazi tattoos and T-shirts celebrating Auschwitz. Among Republican congressional candidates in 2018 were open white supremacists and Nazis. In Brazil, Bolsonaro's triumph has revived Integralism, the fascist current that first emerged in the 1930s. In India, the Hindu nationalist movement is girded by the authentically fascist mass paramilitary organisation, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS). In Israel, the fascist Kahanist movement is represented in office.

Historically, fascism has thrived, not on the originality of its doctrines – it borrowed almost everything from other political traditions – but on appropriating whatever was already popular for its own purposes. Similarly, today's disaster nationalist tendencies metastasise ideological tendencies that were already current. The Islamophobic obsessions of Trump, Modi and most European far-right parties were curated and prepared in the first instance by both liberal and neoconservative intellectuals as part of their justification for the 'war on terror', or in defence of the 'republic' in France or as part of the soft communalism of the centre-left Congress Party in India. Fascism is a pathology that arises within the democratic mainstream.

Disaster nationalism, though not yet representing a complete rupture with liberalism, is culturally and politically anti-liberal in a way that mainstream conservatism hasn't dared to be for decades. It is pseudo-democratic, in that it often prefers plebiscitary consultation to parliamentary haggling and invokes the rights of 'majorities' against parliamentary proceduralism and the law. The 'majority' in question is usually a minority, idealised as the 'real' nation. In its deference to celebrity-politicians, online entrepreneurs and grifters, talented propagandists and confidence men with

a nose for vulnerabilities in crisis-ridden democratic systems who get by on tactical brio and voluntarism, it resembles a modern, networked version of the fascist 'leadership principle'. Its violent anti-communism, even where there is no discernible communist opposition, is as hallucinatory as twentieth-century fascist expostulations against 'Judeo-Bolshevism'. It normalises popular violence against minorities or the poor, supplementing it with new forms of state violence, in a way that resembles the dialectic of radicalisation between fascist leaders and their base. And it resembles fascism in that it is a 'swindle of fulfilment', as Ernst Bloch put it, its fantasies spiralling towards brutal apocalyptic scenarios.[37]

And yet, as Theodor Adorno pointed out in his study of the pessimistic German reactionary Oswald Spengler, we would be foolish to dismiss rightist doom fantasies. They are often attuned to realities that liberal optimism prefers not to acknowledge. The apocalypse is no mere fantasy. We are living in it, after all, from deadly viruses to soil erosion, from economic crisis to geopolitical chaos. One task of this book is to ask what realities, that disaster nationalism obliquely addresses, have we been turning our backs on? Nor is eschatological desire specific to the right. As theologian Catherine Keller puts it, 'All the Western egalitarian or revolutionary movements, the fights for democracy, socialism, women's rights, emancipation of slaves, right on through Martin Luther King's "dream," tapped apocalyptic metaphors of great tribulation and transformation.' One of the best-selling books in history, *The Communist Manifesto*, is a deeply apocalyptic text.[38] The challenge is not simply to berate apocalyptic states but to ask: Which apocalypse?

What *is* a fantasy is the belief that the end of days is, *ipso facto*, exciting. There is a dubious sense in which we can be recruited to enjoying our destruction, as when we doomscroll on social media, consuming videos of wildfires, floods and war in a state of scandalised but titillated disbelief, only to acclimatise ourselves to the latest threshold of ruin. As Maurice Blanchot famously put it, 'the apocalypse is disappointing' because in its glare nothing really changes.[39] Under the pressure of ecological breakdown, the planet just gets slowly sicker, more damaged, more dead. Production costs and prices rise, more of the world's surface becomes uninhabitable, climate refugees find themselves confined in an ever-expanding net of camps and prisons. Life gets tougher and meaner.

There is no reason to assume that, in these circumstances of shortage, stress and struggle, our weakened democratic systems are going to stabilise themselves. Nor can we take it for granted that most people are forever inoculated against fascism. What needs to be explained is the resistant *glamour* of fascism as an idea, and the fact that open flirtation with fascist idiom and imagery is not a demerit for the new nationalist right but a unique selling point. What also demands explanation is the adaptability of neonate fascism to all manner of situations: Why do so many discontents, sexual, economic, political and cultural, lend themselves to the solution of violent nationalism? And why should we expect it to stop where it is?

The 'brown plague' was once a wildly successful contagion, with global reach and outbreaks erupting everywhere, from the Chinese Blue Shirts to Brazilian Integralismo. Its leaders were welcomed as saviours by millions who had previously never even voted for conservative parties. Their worldwide prestige was enormous. Regime after regime fell to the brown plague, and it required the mobilisation of untold numbers of people and the deaths of tens of millions to break its popular grip. (Even after the war, surveys of those who had lived under the Nazi regime showed half had positive memories of it.) We will get nowhere in containing this threat if we start from the assumption that it consists of a small number of troublemakers, a 'basket of deplorables' to use Hillary Clinton's unfortunate phrase, against whom we may define our virtuous selves. There is a fascist temptation for everyone: we all have our jackboots.

1

Class: Not the Economy, Stupid

Capitalism … [is] a great thing when it works properly. In our country … it has not been working properly.

– Donald Trump, August 2015[1]

I.

It isn't the economy – it's witchcraft. In the modern age, it seems natural to look for pecuniary motives in people's behaviour. There must be something in it for them. There had better be. The implicit law of neoliberal politics is that if there is one thing worse than acting out of narrow self-interest, it is not acting out of narrow self-interest.

As disaster nationalism has erupted in the United States, India, the Philippines, Brazil, Poland, Hungary, Italy, France, Chile, Colombia and, most recently, Argentina, pundits have sought the hidden economic motive. Might the far right's new voters be the left behind, the white working class or the squeezed middle? Might their electoral behaviour be an inchoate howl of rage against a system that has failed them? Disappointingly, those voters have recalcitrantly refused to be especially poor or disenfranchised. More importantly, they have shown little interest in their personal economic well-being.

For example, in the summer of 2016, British liberals were stumped and traumatised by the spectacle of millions of people voting defiantly against their own interests. A bolus of politicians, experts and financial institutions had warned that leaving the European Union would devastate the economy; a slim majority of voters decided to do so anyway. The following year, pollsters asked 'Leave' voters how much they'd be prepared to sacrifice to

see ‘Brexit’ achieved. Sixty-one per cent said they would be prepared to see ‘significant damage’ to the economy, while 39 per cent said they would be willing to see themselves or a family member lose their job.[2] This perplexed the liberals: Why would so many vote against their own interests? Why would they choose to make themselves poorer?

This was the wrong question. People rarely vote *for* their interests, construed as immediate concern for their wallets. On the one hand, it is obvious that the recent rise of right-wing nationalism has *something* to do with the economy, and specifically with the global financial crash of 2008. The electoral record in Europe between 1870 and 2014 suggests that voters generally respond to financial crises by moving to the right, with the far right gaining the most. On average, far-right parties increase their vote share by 30 per cent after such a crisis.[3]

On the other hand, decades of research have failed to find any evidence that voters respond to *personal* economic suffering by punishing the incumbent. Belonging to a group whose economic interests have been directly harmed seems only rarely to change political preferences. Leave voters in 2016 were not aberrant in choosing national sovereignty over the sacred cow of ‘the economy’, or even their own immediate well-being. And while ‘Remain’ campaigners were not wrong to say that there was a great deal of racism, xenophobia and disinformation wrapped up in that preference, they were wrong to see any of this as being especially novel – as though racism and lies had never affected the outcome of a British vote before.[4] And they were still more wrong to have campaigned on the assumption that enlightened self-interest would save the day. Their subsequent descent into vapidly moralising subcultures, catastrophising about the economic effects of Brexit while idealising a hardnosed neoliberal bloc, illustrates how far they were from finding a persuasive argument for their cause.

What is ‘self-interest’ anyway? According to Albert O. Hirschmann, the concept of ‘interest’ first gained ground among liberal philosophers like Bernard Mandeville and Adam Smith in the eighteenth century, as an alternative to the rival concept of the ‘passions’. The purpose of this shift was to help neutralise the potentially disruptive passions of the masses, who were becoming political actors in their own right. The easiest way to do this was to arouse one set of passions against another: that is, against lust and ambition, one should incite greed and avarice. To make this seem less

scandalous, they re-described avarice as ‘self-interest’. And self-interest, it was thought, would incentivise people to behave prudently and in conformity with morality and the law.[5] This is how liberal philosophers thought people ought to be governed, not how people really behaved. But, taken seriously, the concept of ‘interest’ could never be reduced to greed or avarice. To have an interest in anything is to find one’s attention and desire riveted to it, as we might be absorbed by a distant war, or the fate of an endangered species despite its having no bearing on our income. We are passionate animals. Passion, as Karl Marx wrote, is our ‘essential force’.[6] To understand what’s happening today, we must return to the passions.

Among the passions, the most important for this chapter is resentment. For good reasons, resentment is seen as a disreputable, destructive emotion. But it is also essential to the sense of justice. We feel resentment, not at accidental harms, and not even necessarily at deliberate harms, but at what is felt as *unfair*. And we often feel resentment on behalf of others so that, as Andrew Sayer writes, it ‘derives from the capacity for fellow-feeling’.[7] Resentment is not purely a personal pathology equivalent, as one wit put it, to swallowing poison and waiting for the other fellow to die. It is a coherent and moral way of thinking and of acting on the world.

But we don’t always know who or what to resent. Many of the sources of our problems are obscure, remote and impersonal, and they can appear almost random. For example, it was reported in 2022 that austerity policies in the United Kingdom had caused 300,000 excess deaths.[8] That causal relation would not necessarily have been evident to surviving relatives at the time, when the deaths would have been attributed to ailments such as cardiovascular disease rather than to the conditions making people vulnerable to the disease. If one wasn’t tuned in to politics, one might have been aware of losing loved ones, of misfortunes piling up, of the quality of life generally getting worse, without having a face to put to the crime. In those circumstances, resentment might either remain below the threshold of awareness or settle on a personal or political scapegoat. Another problem is that resentment can be quite an addictive emotional swamp. Max Scheler, in his study of resentment, describes how those possessed by it can be enthralled by the sense of powerlessness and victimisation, relishing the ‘growing pleasure afforded by invective and negation’. An example of this would be the sort of fruitless moaning described by Karen Wells and Sophie Watson in their study of London shopkeepers, who feel victimised by large

retailers, neglected by government and cheated by asylum seekers and Muslims. This is not unusual in conservative politics.[9]

In its most dangerous form, resentment becomes a politically enabled passion for persecution. The classic version of this is the witch hunt. In early-modern Europe, 100,000 people, three quarters of whom were women, were tried and 50,000 were executed for a crime now thought to be impossible. Witchcraft accusations were not usually initiated by religious or political authorities, or by witch-finders like Matthew Hopkins, the Puritan terror of East Anglia. They came from ordinary, afflicted communities, who blamed misfortunes such as a child's illness, dying cattle, straying husbands and death, on the diabolical malice of an unpopular neighbour: *maleficium*.

Alleged witches were accused of having joined the Satanic conspiracy against Christendom, formed a pact with the devil in exchange for destructive powers, partaken in secret orgiastic 'sabbats' involving sex with Satan, and suckled demonic 'familiars' from a secret teat. These beliefs were supported by authorities, such as King James I (whose *Daemonologie* popularised the belief in witches) and the lawyer Jean Bodin (who is justly regarded as the original philosopher of the modern sovereign state). And these beliefs crossed the divide between warring Catholic and Protestant nations. The witch hunt was, as Silvia Federici puts it, 'the first unifying terrain in the politics of the new European nation-states'. But the stereotyped story of occult pacts, orgies and demons was less important than the injury breeding the accusation. The historian Robin Briggs points out that in most of the confessions extracted from these 'witches', the devil was 'a very secondary figure, a shadowy presence behind angry neighbours'.[10]

Witchcraft accusations were a popular theodicy: they explained affliction. As societies were racked by wars of Reformation, enclosures of communal land, plagues, hunger and civil war, they explained why people felt abandoned by God. The accumulation of social crises and personal trajectories of decline induced the apocalyptic apprehension in which the paranoid stories of inquisitors like Heinrich Kramer and King James I could be weaponised for mass executions.

Thought about in this way, the contagion of disaster nationalism flourishes, not merely because of disinformation and false beliefs, but because the economy of resentment circulating in modern societies makes these beliefs attractive. The modern witch, be it a 'cultural Marxist',

‘communist’, ‘Antifa’, ‘anti-national’, ‘Arab lover’ or some other ‘traitor’ who can be killed in the streets of Manila, Kenosha, New Delhi or São Paulo, offers a pseudo-explanation for a misfortune specific to the nation-state: how a sovereign people lost its sovereignty. And to restore the pacific union between people and government, nation and state, disaster nationalism provokes a familiar fusion of neighbourly malice, hostile testimony, inquisition, incitement and lethal political violence.

II.

Disaster nationalists speak the language of class. They claim to represent an ‘abandoned’, ‘betrayed’, ‘left-behind’ constituency, abbreviated in the anglosphere as the ‘white working class’. Nigel Farage, when he was leader of the UK Independence Party, claimed to speak for the ‘forgotten’ working class. Steve Bannon, Trump’s former chief strategist, claims that the Republicans have been turned ‘into a working-class party’.[11]

Pundits line up to take their word for it. According to the press, Trump represents a ‘working-class revolt’, Brexit was a ‘working-class revolution’, and Marine Le Pen channels the grievances of the ‘white working class’.[12] For mainstream punditry, this working-class rebellion is either an authentic protest at their neglect at the hands of a remote establishment, or a howl of misdirected rage based more on ‘status anxiety’ (the white male fear of losing ground relative to minorities and foreigners) than on economic losses. For the liberal-left, workers rallying to far-right politics reflects the entrenched loyalties of ‘white supremacy’ trumping, as it were, class interests.

The trouble with such arguments is that no one quite knows what the ‘white working class’ is. The term is used in a way that implies an antiquated version of class in which workers use their hands and the rich use their brains. In the United States, psephologists tend to use the term to refer to whites without a college degree: as though there were not a large, highly educated and heavily indebted part of the working class, or as though every manager, supervisor or business owner is an Ivy League genius. A quarter of small business owners, and a tenth of CEOs from FTSE 100 companies, have no college education at all. Meanwhile, among the poorest workers earning at or below minimum wage, more than 50 per cent have

some college education.[13] (If you have lumped the lowest-paid workers and the most powerful CEOs together in the same 'class', then I submit your class analysis needs some work.) In the United Kingdom, pollsters use market research categories to define as 'working class' those who perform menial or manual work, as though nothing had changed in the labour force since the 1960s. Nonetheless, since it is assumed that the 'white working class' is the home base of right-wing nationalism, it tends to follow that parties of the electoral left must adopt the themes of the far right to win those voters back. Compounding this erroneous reasoning, many liberal commentators have opted instead to excoriate the 'privilege' of those workers, a term which implies that they already have more than they ought to.

There is scant evidence, in fact, that the 'white working class' is driving support for the new far right, even in the anglosphere where the concept has purchase. Take Trump, for instance. Using income as a slightly better proxy for class than education – although even this is sketchy – Trump lost among voters classified earning less than $50,000 a year in 2016, and among voters classified as earning less than $100,000 a year in 2020. His support among these voters was higher than that achieved by his predecessors John McCain and Mitt Romney, but lower than that achieved by George W. Bush. He won over strategically important groups of workers, including a large minority of union households and former Obama-voting counties in the rustbelt states.[14] Even here, however, Trump's support among union households was exaggerated: the gap between Republicans and Democrats in this constituency fell far more because of Democratic collapse than Republican surge. The working class is also far less likely to vote than members of other classes: in 2016, 48 per cent of voters from families in the lowest income category turned out, compared to 86 per cent for those in the highest income category. The mainstream parties are to blame for this: studies show government policy is not correlated even slightly with public opinion but correlates strongly with the preferences of the funding cartels backing each party. As Francis Fox Piven and Richard Cloward once argued, if you want poor people to vote, you have to offer them something.[15] There is no evidence of working-class voters driving Trumpism.

What about white voters overall? In the United States, Trump won 54 per cent of the white vote in 2016 and 55 per cent in 2020. A majority of

white American voters have backed the Republicans since 1968, when Richard Nixon led a white backlash against civil rights. The highest share of the white vote achieved by a Republican was 66 per cent, in Ronald Reagan's landslide victory in 1984. In 2012, the defeated Mitt Romney won 59 per cent of the white vote. Trump *lost* white support relative to his predecessors. Meanwhile, by 2020, after four years of race-baiting and incitement, he had gained significantly among black and especially Hispanic voters. This is not to say, however, that many of the whites who backed Trump did not do so partly for racist reasons. There is evidence that nationalism in white-majority countries is partly driven by perceptions of white decline, and that increased attachment to the superordinate national identity is seen as a means to white revival.[16]

'Whiteness' mattered in 2016, but the ways in which it mattered differed depending on which white people were being talked about. There is a world of difference between the 'whiteness' of Virginia miners who flipped from Obama to Trump, that of the typically Republican-voting suburban middle class, and that of Fifth Avenue billionaires. Rich whites benefit most from the 'racial wealth gap', and they have been the least threatened by relative decline since the Great Recession of 2008. On other hand, white swing voters in coal country had experienced increasing poverty since 2008, reducing their marginal advantage over black voters. They perceived their losses in zero-sum terms: every job for a black worker or a migrant was one they didn't get. Another salient difference, though, is that Virginia miners also have a history of frequently thwarted efforts at building interracial solidarity while, to put it crudely, the white bourgeoisie merely has a history of concealing its racist hostility behind a protective chassis of civility. In general, it is unclear how much of Trump's support in 2016 is explained by 'whiteness': the biggest issues favouring him were trade and China-bashing, while the biggest issue costing him votes was his stance on immigration.[17]

The 'white working class' theory looks even worse when compared to developments outside the United States. In 2014, Narendra Modi's vote share was lowest among the poorest. In 2019, he won among all income brackets. In 2018, support for Jair Bolsonaro was highest in the so-called 'established classes', which roughly correspond to the upper-middle class. In 2022, Bolsonaro led only among those earning five times the average salary.[18] In 2016, Rodrigo Duterte gained the biggest share of the vote

among the upper and middle classes, with the poor slightly less likely to vote for him. In 2022, his successor Bongbong Marcos won across all classes.[19] There are some exceptions in Europe. Poland's Law and Justice Party is far more popular with the unemployed than with employers, for instance. The Brothers of Italy appeal strongly to the middle class but also attract a disproportionate share of the 'blue collar' vote. In Hungary, Fidesz picked up working-class voters in the rustbelt after the Socialists collapsed amid austerity and corruption. Marine Le Pen led among French workers in the 2022 presidential election, although this is complicated by historically high rates of abstention among working-class voters.[20] The overall pattern, though, is for the far right to start with a largely middle-class base and then build effective coalitions *across classes*.

The working class that disaster nationalists claim to speak for is not, of course, the labour movement. It is not even a class, properly speaking, but a passively resentful conglomeration of individuals who believe they obey the law, respect authority and resent queue-jumpers and outsiders. Evidence for this is that, wherever far-right politicians are confronted with collective working-class action, they fumble. For example, when the United Auto Workers went on strike for a pay raise at Ford, General Motors and Stellantis in September 2023, it ought to have been simple for Donald Trump, as a Republican presidential candidate supposedly speaking up for the working class, to express his support. After all, this was the core of the Democrat-betrayed working class which he had claimed to represent. Instead, when asked whose side he was on, he prevaricated:

> I'm on the side of making our country great, uh, the auto workers, uh, are not going to have any jobs when you come right down to it because if you take a look at what they're doing with electric cars, electric cars are gonna be made in China. The auto workers are not gonna have any – I tell you, the auto workers are being sold down the river by their leadership, and their leadership should endorse Trump.

Shortly thereafter, at the request of the president of Drake Enterprises, Trump visited a non-union shop in Michigan, and he spoke again on the danger posed by electric cars. Nathan Stemple, the boss of the company, complained that electric vehicles would 'put us out of business'. There was

scarcely more clarity elsewhere on the Trump right. Steve Bannon and former Trump official Peter Navarro sympathised with the strikers but ignored the issues of the strike, blaming a supposed ‘wage-price spiral’ for inflation and migrants for pushing down wages. Nor is this uncharacteristic. The Trump administration was hostile to labour rights, stacked the National Labour Relations Board with union-busting corporate lawyers, and in 2020 campaigned against a raise in the federal minimum wage which had not increased since 2009.[21]

It is much the same elsewhere. In France, Marine Le Pen’s Rassemblement National and its predecessor the Front National have long been hostile to trade unionism. The Front National had supported the ‘criminalisation of picketing’ and decried unions as ‘obsolete and unrepresentative’, causing the ‘stagnation of our economy’. Le Pen had proposed reforms to make it harder for unions to strike to ‘compensate for their lack of legitimacy’. Rassemblement National sees unions, in the words of Perpignan mayor Louis Aliot, as ‘morticians of the economic and labour world’. The Modi government in India has passed union-busting labour codes, permitting easy mass hire-and-fire and the use of casual labour to do the work of permanent employees. Bolsonaro, who in 2018 told workers that ‘fewer rights are better than no jobs’ and that Brazil ‘has an excess of rights’, went on the offensive immediately, flexibilising working hours and permitting derogations from health and safety laws. In Hungary, the Orbán administration uses anti-union laws such as a minimum service clause to severely curb the right to strike and in 2019 introduced a new ‘slave law’ that would add an average of two hours to every working day.[22]

The key word in the phrase ‘white working class’ tends to be ‘white’. The idea, implicit or explicit, is that these workers have a traditional moral claim as whites that have been ‘betrayed’. The incremental victories of anti-racism, so the logic goes, have won forms of recognition and state access for oppressed minorities that white workers are denied. And the cosmopolitan centre-left, in defending those gains within a context of intensified global competition holding down wages at the bottom, has started to oppress and marginalise white workers. Thus, after decades of official omertà on terms like ‘class’, after years in which we were all ‘middle class’ and the burdens of class and work were glossed over in the giddy hubris of globalisation, class returned as a pseudo-ethnic identity. And its defining characteristic was not militancy, but ethnic loss.

Disaster nationalism profits immensely from a symbiosis with its erstwhile opponents in politics and media who, as Aaron Winter and Aurelien Mondon have shown, have systematically overstated the popularity of the far right's agenda. This has led to well-meaning liberals and social democrats ratifying parts of the far-right platform or trying to patronise their opponents in a self-satirising attempt to 'speak worker'. (A grimly funny example of this was political advisor Lord Glasman telling the British Labour Party to talk to the fascist English Defence League in a bid to overcome the 'massive hate and rage against us' from working-class people.)[23] Such undignified genuflections fluff the anti-establishment credentials of the far right by overstating their working-class support and the salience of their concerns. And, functioning as a self-fulfilling prophesy, it also assists them in their efforts to annex melancholic, downwardly mobile parts of the working-class vote and integrate them into a winning cross-class coalition.

At best, the exaggerated attention to workers as an element of the far-right base is informed by a misguided sense that working-class support for right-wing politics is counterintuitive and needs special explanation. At worst, it is either scapegoating or wishful thinking.

III.

The new nationalism, despite its serenading of workers, has little to say about toil that doesn't romanticise 'the dignity of hard work' as both Mike Pence and Donald Trump Jr. put it. Hard work is the main source of personal dignity and moral status for workers in conservative ideology.[24]

However, in its poetics of national betrayal – 'American carnage' as Trump's inauguration address put it – the new nationalism indirectly acknowledges class violence and leverages a fact that is usually politely ignored. Civilization may make onerous demands on us, as Freud believed, but the greatest thief of leisure and libido is the uneven distribution of the necessity to work. All complex civilizations to date have been class societies in which the majority work for the few. Capitalist civilization's unique dynamism derives from its ability to extract unprecedented effort from an ever-expanding global labour supply: an enormous caloric transfer in favour of the wealthy.[25]

Work, for most of humanity, means working for others, in conditions one doesn't choose, in which precarity of rights and survival leaves one exposed to coercion and humiliation. Nor has all this effort ever been extracted from all employees on equal terms. Employers need not depend on *de jure* segregation as they once did, but they prefer a segregated labour market in which certain groups of workers (women, migrants, ethnic minorities) 'naturally' come cheap and flexible.[26] The rewards of all this productivity are prodigious, but, of course, the biggest rewards accrue to the owners and managers of capital. Shorn of all euphemism, work is exploitation.

A glut of research suggests that work is the single largest source of stress and anxiety in the world today. Contrary to corporate lore, it is not over-burdened managers who suffer the most from stress. The famous Whitehall studies of workplace depression showed that, as you descend the chain of authority in the workplace, and the job becomes more controlled and the employees more submissive, the cortisol levels rise, hypertension goes up and the risk of heart attack or stroke increases: class injuries. As Jeffrey Pfeffer's work shows, no amount of research documenting this has convinced bosses to change their management practices.[27]

Even before the onset of a long decline in labour organising, Richard Sennett and Jonathan Cobb discovered that among the 'hidden injuries of class' was the 'inner conviction' felt by employees that the injustices they experienced were all their own fault. Andrew Sayer's work on class similarly finds a 'low-level shame' experienced by working-class people, often operating just below the threshold of articulacy. This shame manifests at the earliest stages of the civilizing processes of class society, beginning in the classroom, where working-class students are socialised in their roles. Diane Reay's study of working-class girls in England found that they are very sensitive to unequal fortunes. They are aware that it is the posh children who do well, and that the good jobs and good lives will go to them. They are assailed by the anxious apprehension of being 'literally nothing'. The working-class women studied by Beverley Skeggs prefer, partly because class is experienced as exclusion from decent society, to avoid identifying with any class.[28] Class shame is the class consciousness of the defeated.

Today, the crisis of democratic action that Alain Bertho describes in politics is mirrored in industry. Cultures of shame had historically been

mitigated by class organising. Winning rights, welfare and minimum wages from Kentucky to Kerala was not just a material benefit: it established recognition and demonstrated that workers were not completely powerless. It was even possible for some to speak of class pride. However, the unions and parties of the working class have been disintegrating with force throughout the neoliberal era. Average union density in OECD countries fell from 30 per cent to 16 per cent between 1985 and 2019. With this fall came a prolonged fall in labour's share of income, averaging nine per cent from across the wealthiest OECD countries from 1973 to 2013. Even this data is misleading, since it includes the most highly paid among the salariat and managers: the top 10 per cent of earners who receive just under half of all pay according to the International Labor Organisation.[29]

The retrenchment of welfare rights has also been global, with even popular healthcare and education programmes subject to cost-saving techniques and partial privatisations. This leaves most workers positioned delicately over a barrel, more dependent on labour markets and employers who have more power over them. As Mark Ames's disturbing history of 'going postal' suggests, it is precisely the resulting paralysis, class dysphoria and vulnerability to abuse that was a key original spur to today's mass shooter phenomenon.[30] Class injury also has a role in recent neo-nationalist outbursts – though not the one implied in the quasi-zoological curiosity with which anglophone journalists and academics have alighted on the 'white working class'.

A review of the evidence across fourteen OECD countries by political scientists Sarah Engler and David Weisstanner found that long-term rising inequality intensifies the perceived threat to income and status, not particularly of the most deprived workers (who tend to be more immunised to the nationalist contagion), but of those higher up the class hierarchy. This echoes other findings, which suggest that among workers it is the relative 'winners' of the neoliberal workplace who gravitate to 'reactive nationalism'. Since work is so segmented and stratified, with proliferating 'horizontal' inequalities between workers, it no longer forms the basis for a durable class identity. In that situation, those who have just enough security and prosperity to be satisfied with their lot tend towards a form of 'affluence chauvinism', identifying with the wealthy and seeing their nation as an island of wealth that must be protected from migrants and spongers.[31]

Alongside the threat from the poor, there is the demoralising experience of failure, of downward mobility. In 2009 and 2017, surveys of voters in the United Kingdom found that those who had experienced relative downward mobility, rather than the poorest per se, were more likely to agree with anti-immigrant nationalism. 'Resentful nationalism' was found to correspond to personal experiences of downward class mobility and failure, among both working-class and middle-class voters. In Brazil, a significant part of Bolsonaro's vote came from the downwardly mobile lower-middle class who, in their decline into precarious work after 2013, began to resent Bolsa Família payments for poor families and university racial quotas and were drawn into the orbit of Evangelical churches by their provision of social assistance programmes. The same pattern can be found among the Capitol rioters, complicating any neat distinction between 'economic anxiety' (downward mobility) and 'status anxiety' (racism).[32] This suggests that the emotional core of 'left behind' ideology is the intolerable personal shame of failure, and the fear of becoming indistinguishable from those at the bottom.

Why has marginal success been enough to bind those who are not wealthy to the wealthy? Why has failure, always difficult, become so toxic? The rise of inequality, which makes downward mobility more punishing, is only one aspect of a comprehensive social transformation that has taken place over roughly forty years. Neoliberalism, the name for that transformation, is not the same thing as the 'free market'. As Philip Mirowski's history of the 'neoliberal thought collective' demonstrates, the neoliberal founders were not classical liberals opposed to the big state. They were far more interested in using the state to reform human beings. Neoliberals, reacting to the threat posed by mass democracy to the sovereignty of markets, thought that people had to be made to part with their ill-founded belief in equality. They had to be persuaded to abandon tribal sentiments of solidarity and accept the law of universal competition. They had to be incentivised to see themselves and others as what they 'really were': competitive, risk-taking capitalists betting on the market.[33]

This is a paranoid system. Neoliberalism's founding precept ought to be 'they're all out to get you'. In it, no society can exist beyond basic survival units such as the family. There are only competitors, and anyone might stick the knife in. One has also to be constantly vigilant against the whispering temptations of Satan. There is no 'public service' that isn't a hypocritical cover story for power-maximising bureaucrats. There is no

‘freedom from want’ that is not a lie perpetuated by layabouts and privileged clients of the state. Claims made about or on behalf of society can only obscure a selfish power move. No wonder Adam Kotsko suggests that the air under neoliberalism is as thick with demons as it was in medieval Christendom.[34]

To read the social world as diabolical in this way qualifies neoliberalism as, in Wendy Brown’s term, ‘sociophobic’. This is not to say that neoliberalism is amoral. Indeed, as Jessica Whyte demonstrates in *The Morals of the Market*, it is intensely moralistic about market rules and the need to embed them in what it regards as the legitimately evolved order of families, Christianity and Western civilization. However, the practice of building competitive values into every area of life eroded the very social bonds that were supposed to keep civilization going.[35]

In addition to inculcating this generalised paranoia, neoliberalism has aggrandised the deeply pessimistic character of capitalism. In practical terms, the neoliberal reformation was morally nihilistic: ‘nihiliberalism’, as Mark Fisher dubbed it. The point was not any admirable social goal, but merely the maintenance of a market order in which everyone competes in a state of ignorance: ‘a willed and deliberate unknown,’ as Raymond Williams put it, ‘in which the defining factor is advantage’. This pointless pursuit of advantage as the *summum bonum* of social life also entailed constant measuring of self-worth against the success of others, so that failure became unbearable at just the point where millions could amount to ‘literally nothing’.[36]

Disaster nationalism today harnesses the insecurity, humiliation and miseries of heterogeneous classes and social groups, including some of the poorest, to a revolt against liberal civilization, with its pluralist and democratic norms. It offers the balm of vengeance, the promise of national self-love and the cure of restoring society to a more pristine, harmoniously hierarchical state through condign violence. A cosmic reset, one might say. It seeks to restore the traditional consolations of nationalism for the threatened and downwardly mobile. The obsession with seemingly trivial expressive norms, such as the use of correct gender pronouns, is in fact fundamentally about how much violence and humiliation are socially permissible.

The rhetorical shock tactics of Trump, Bolsonaro, Modi and Duterte, drilling their audiences with shots of adrenaline, exciting them with wild

relief at the expression of the inexpressible, making them laugh at their own fear of expressing it, are not merely a paltry revolt against the liberal superego. To call Mexicans ‘rapists’ and ‘murderers’ (Trump), to deride Indian journalists as ‘presstitutes’ and secularists as ‘sickular’ ‘anti-nationals’ (BJP activists), to order Philippines soldiers to shoot female opponents between the legs (Duterte), to claim that wearing masks during a pandemic is ‘for fairies’ (Bolsonaro) is programmatic. It aims to channel the resentment. It aims to barbarise mores. It aims at barbarism.

IV.

When disaster nationalists talk up their working-class credentials, however disingenuously, it is not simply a ruse. The new far right is not just the same old business-minded conservatism. Like its twentieth-century forebears, it seeks a different relationship to workers than the parliamentary conservatives it is trying to eclipse.

Ever since the franchise was extended to the working class, parliamentary conservatives have needed the support of working-class voters to win elections. However, as Michael Mann puts it, they have sought passive consent for a system that they regard as ‘essentially harmonious’. The far right, in contrast, recognised class divisions as a problem for nationalism. Given their support for private property and the state, and their social Darwinist belief in hierarchy, they were not interested in abolishing class. But neither were they absolute defenders of the system, especially where it undermined national unity. They aspired, instead, to ‘transcend’ class within a new nationalism. Transcendence, essential to the utopian programme of engineering the ‘new man’ and ‘new woman’, became ‘the central plank of fascism’s electoral program’.[37]

This meant wooing workers. As early as 1898, the French novelist Maurice Barrès, the future leader of the far-right Ligue des Patriotes, proposed a programme of reforms that he called ‘national socialism’. It sought not to abolish class, but to change its spiritual meaning, to nationalise it. This entailed reforms that were supposed to include workers in the nation, such as a graduated income tax and controls on the inflow of ‘cheap’ migrant labour. Mainstream conservatives at the time, though happy to flirt with migrant-bashing, rejected this political economy. During the

French coal strikes of 1908, Action Française, the French proto-fascist movement, tried to ally itself with the anarcho-syndicalist Confédération générale du travail (CGT). The reactionary journalist Léon Daudet took great pleasure in mocking the liberals and parliamentary socialists who were so frightened of the working class that they set soldiers to shoot at them. On the Italian radical right, Enrico Corradini looked for an alliance with the syndicalist workers' movement.[38]

That attitude was severely tested by the end of the First World War. Socialist revolution in Russia, and ensuing uprisings in Germany and Hungary, terrified the right. What was most galling was that these revolutions were led by those who had rejected the war and its fake glory. As the Italian Fascist movement pronounced at its birth, it would 'declare war against socialism … because it has opposed nationalism'. Even then, the more so because of their fear of the revolutionary working class, they sought to entice workers to the nationalist cause. The German Workers' Party, shortly renamed the National Socialist German Workers' Party, was set up by artisans and journalists desperate to attract workers to nationalism. As such their early programme included 'nationalization of all businesses', the sharing of 'profits from wholesale trade', the prohibition of child labour and 'extensive … security for old age'. The programme of the Italian Fascists, too, initially included heavy taxes on capital, worker participation in the management of industry, women's suffrage and the confiscation of war profits – but, again, for the purposes of 'transcendence' of class divisions within a corporatist state.[39]

If the means included economic enticements, the goal of fascist political economy was spiritual. Justifying the failed 'beer hall putsch' before jurors, Hitler explained the logic of his actions: the 1918 revolution which overthrew the Kaiser and ended the war was an 'unprecedented criminal act' which meant not only that Marxism had to be 'fought to the end', but that 'the German working people, the broad masses, must be made national again'. Even in power, with the workers' movement physically liquidated, the Nazi regime went to great lengths to stimulate working-class support: converting workers to national socialism was a crucial part of the programme, if for no other reason than that they represented the one potentially organised force that could break Nazi rule.[40]

To say the least, this is not the situation faced by today's far right. Nowhere does it confront a powerful trade union movement, or even a

robust social democracy, let alone a revolutionary threat. Insofar as the working class must be 'nationalised', it is because of the globalising tendencies of the capitalist system. Nor does the contemporary far right even propose a coherent alternative to globalisation. In the incipient fascisms of the Global South it rarely even attempts to. Today's far right has been strongly affected by decades of neoliberal political economy. In France and Hungary, far-right parties have openly experimented with aspects of the German variety of neoliberalism known as ordoliberalism, involving strong, technocratic state leadership of the economy to foster capitalist competition and organise harsh penal policies to deal with the indigent, the rebellious and the migratory. In India, Narendra Modi has pioneered an autocratic version of neoliberal rule. In Latin America, leaders such as Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil and Javier Milei in Argentina are aggressive exponents of economic liberalism.[41]

This is not as counterintuitive as it might seem. Neoliberalism was born as a backlash against mass democracy and the incursions of the welfare state and human rights on property rights. As Quinn Slobodian puts it in his scathing critique of the globalists, 'the neoliberal project focused on designing institutions—not to liberate markets but to encase them, to inoculate capitalism against the threat of democracy'. From Ludwig von Mises's praise for Austria's Dollfuss dictatorship to Friedrich von Hayek's support for Chile's General Pinochet, neoliberalism has been intensely relaxed about the use of despotism to achieve these ends. And in the mainstream of neoliberal morality has always been the use of the state to fortify Christian values, the family and the nation against the corrosive influence of socialism. There is, then, a strong overlap between aspects of neoliberalism and fascist political economy. Today's far right embraces neoliberalism's social Darwinist management of the poor and its tendency to treat social problems as racial or ethnic problems.[42]

Where disaster nationalism does break with neoliberal political economy, it would seem, is in its repudiation of the institutions of neoliberalism, such as the European Union and NAFTA. Disaster nationalism chafes against the iron cage of 'globalist' constraints on the nation-state. Yet this is only partially true, and only in the Global North, where the extent of the rebellion so far has taken the form of trade wars, import duties and proposals for preferences for 'native' workers over migrants. Trump, Le Pen, the Brexiteers, Orbán and so on have yet to make

a decisive break with globalisation; meanwhile Duterte, Modi and Bolsonaro are no friends of protectionism. During his time in office, Duterte even inveighed against 'elite protectionism'. Another breach is in disaster nationalism's flirtation with a form of state-led industrial policy which, by targeting assistance at vulnerable or lagging parts of industry or national infrastructure, 'distorts' the market. Yet even this, from the famous 'Gujarat model' in India to the 'Davao model' in the Philippines, is achieved using the familiar neoliberal mechanisms of tax cuts and 'public-private partnerships'. This means that while a handful of corporations with state access benefit from heavy subsidies for delivering on key projects, the process continues to be profit-seeking and led by the private sector. And if it comes at the expense of expenditures on health and welfare, or overrides climate exigencies or indigenous rights, this makes it all the more muscular a route to what Modi calls 'upliftment'.[43]

The new far right does not, and cannot, apart from its neofascist fringes, propose class 'transcendence' in any shape. It is not, even in opposition, redistributive. At most it modifies the cutthroat competition it otherwise vigorously embraces with national preferences or alleviates its effects for certain groups of voters with cash transfers. Nor does it idolise the state as classical fascism did. While it is aggressive in its use of the repressive arm of the state to pursue national enemies, it is usually hostile if not paranoid about the state's welfarist or medical interventions. Nor does it offer any utopian prospectus for constructing the 'new man' or 'new woman' out of the materials of a broken society. It is, to the contrary, convinced that grand social engineering plans are the sinister project of 'globalists' and 'cultural Marxists'. It is even wary to the point of phobic of any claim made on behalf of 'society', which is ever on the brink of emasculating the masculine individual.

Whereas interwar fascism was critically a phenomenon of late-developing capitalist nations, of so-called 'proletarian nations' as Mussolini described Italy, disaster nationalism addresses the problem of relative stagnation or decline in the international system. Whereas fascism took root in Germany and Italy partly as a colonial solution to their relative subordination, their being relegated down the 'imperialist chain' as Nicos Poulantzas put it, disaster nationalism fully embraces the curative powers of what Ravinder Kaur calls the 'branded nation' as a hub for investment. Indeed, as Kaur goes on to say, there is a natural symbiosis between the

nation imagined as a bounded space of resources and the nation imagined through the lens of ethnic absolutism: between hypercapitalism and hypernationalism.

What disaster nationalism offers, instead of transcendence, is *muscular national capitalism*. It promises, as Donald Trump suggests, to make capitalism 'work', but in a way that is very different to what we've been accustomed to. As much as the metrics of growth and employment data still matter, 'the economy' is treated as a moral space in which it is argued that the wrong people have been losing. Mexicans, Chinese, Muslims, Eastern European migrants, drug addicts, criminals, the feckless underclass, minorities of all kinds have purportedly thrived at the expense of the native working class. Disaster nationalism promises that capitalism – stripped of entitlements for minorities, or of trading or migratory arrangements that benefit non-nationals, ringfenced by national protections – will include those it deems native workers in its renewed dynamism. 'Jobs' and 'investment' become bywords for ethnic uplift. The ethic of popular war against national enemies limns, rather than replaces, the war of all against all in the pursuit of self-interest.

In purely material terms, this is a meagre political offer. Average incomes under Trump grew more slowly than under his predecessor, and the rich gained far more than anyone else. Under Bolsonaro, even before the pandemic, average incomes fell. In Modi's India, average consumer expenditure fell. In the Philippines, before the pandemic, the number of Filipinos rating themselves 'poor' reached a five-year high at 54 per cent in 2019.[44] To some extent, the appeal of this overture must reflect the paucity of the alternatives offered by the democratic system. But its edge over its rivals is clearly not in any added material wellbeing, but in the psychological surplus offered by nationalist renewal.

Taken to its extreme, as we'll see in chapter 5, this logic lends itself to the programme of uplift and national development through cleansing violence. 'Economic populism', it turns out, can with minimal fuss morph into pogromist populism, or death-squad populism.

2

Disasters: Knowing Too Much

I feel as I'm sure a prisoner must feel who has been sentenced to prison for a crime he didn't commit.

– Letter from a resident of Buffalo Creek to Kai T. Erikson, *Everything in Its Path: Destruction of Community in the Buffalo Creek Flood*[1]

I.

Disaster brings the apocalypse in its wake: apocalypse in the sense of an 'unveiling', given to survivors as a kind of insight into the awful truth of the world. In 1972, for example, there was a notorious corporate disaster at Buffalo Creek in West Virginia, wherein a dam broke and a reservoir of toxic sludge maintained by the mining company flooded the valley, destroying homes and killing over a hundred people. 'This disaster that happened to us,' explained a survivor of the Buffalo Creek disaster in 1972, 'I believe it opened up a lot of people's eyes.' She went on:

> I believe there will be wars, and there will be a bomblike thing that will just destroy this place to pieces. Somebody, some fool, is going to blow it all to pieces. Sure as I'm sitting here and you're sitting there, it'll happen … Sometimes I'll go to bed and think about it, you know, the end of time, destruction, what's going on in wars. It's like growing up, I guess.

Disasters are supposed to pull us together. They are supposed to produce a wave of euphoria among survivors once the worst has passed, forging in the ruins a 'city of comrades'. Rebecca Solnit shows us how disasters can

spawn ‘disaster communities’ and even, by disrupting the ordinary misery and alienation of daily life, inflame utopian desires.[2]

It isn’t necessarily so. A ‘city of comrades’ is only likely to appear in special circumstances, where the disaster doesn’t disperse the community, where the community was not already split along multiple faultlines (class, race, religion), where there were already traditions of self-help, mutualism and solidarity, and – in some instances – where the disaster is not inflicted by other human beings. What happens when the misery is ‘anthropogenic’, the resources for self-help are negligible, social trust is in the gutter, and the expected reflexes of decency and charity fail to materialise?

In his work on disasters over several decades, the sociologist Kai Erikson notes, he has never once found the fabled euphoria or ‘democracy of distress’. To the contrary, survivors have presented as bewildered, resigned, furious, muted – above all, traumatised. Rather than discovering community, they have divided into factions of mutual recrimination and retreated into personal survivalist enclaves.[3] For example, the Buffalo Creek disaster in West Virginia, 1972, was a ‘man-made’ flood. When a sky-high wave of 132 million gallons of toxic black water broke out of the mining company’s reservoirs and tore through the creek, ripping up thousands of homes and killing 125 people, it was clear that the company was at fault. The company, instead of displaying the slightest contrition or charity, retreated behind a phalanx of lawyers, calling the disaster an ‘act of God’.

What was finally so defeating about the experience was the company’s brutally impersonal response. In US law today, corporations are defined as persons, but in Buffalo Creek, as in most other cases of corporate disaster, they proved as monstrously inhuman and invulnerable to human appeal as the banks in Steinbeck’s novel *The Grapes of Wrath*:

> Those creatures don’t breathe air, don’t eat side-meat. They breathe profits; they eat the interest on money … The bank is something else than men. It happens that every man in a bank hates what the bank does, and yet the bank does it. The bank is something more than men, I tell you. It’s the monster. Men made it, but they can’t control it.[4]

It is the *moral violence*, and the absence of any community resilience against it, that really hurts. The survivor of such a life-shattering experience, denied the salve of justice or even charity, would have earned their pessimism. They would be entitled to conclude, as a character in Cormac McCarthy's *Stella Maris* puts it, that 'at the core of reality lies a deep and eternal demonium'.[5]

It is worse when, in Erikson's terms, acute disaster piles on top of chronic disaster. A chronic disaster would include the anomic forces of poverty, regional decline, long-term unemployment and depression which give rise to 'deaths of despair'. Such a disaster

> gathers force slowly and insidiously, creeping around one's defenses rather than smashing through them. The person is unable to mobilize his normal defenses against the threat, sometimes because he has elected consciously or unconsciously to ignore it, sometimes because he has been misinformed about it, and sometimes because he cannot do anything to avoid it in any case.[6]

In the case of Buffalo Creek, the disaster had been gathering for decades. The mining company that had in the interwar years ruled its workers with an iron fist, terrorising union organisers with the assistance of local police, made much of its workforce disposable through automation in the post-war era. The population dwindled, and those left behind had, to riot in euphemism, few 'transferrable skills'. Injured on the job, sick with black lung, wary of their sons working in the mines, those left behind often resigned themselves to life on disability while their children built lives elsewhere. They were not, by Erikson's account, desperately poor – the wage rate for those who continued to work the mines wasn't pitiful – but they were diminished. And when acute disaster struck, they were stricken. They were cold, wet and numb. They wandered around inquiring after loved ones. Then, brutally abused and disabused by the company's cold response, they experienced what Erikson says was tantamount to a 'psychological concussion', producing an emotional flattening, a 'dulled silence', and a survivalist retreat to the periphery of life. Wherein the survivor is left with what disaster recovery expert Lucy Easthope calls by

the Welsh word *hiraeth*: longing for a place to which there is no return.[7] Very much like growing up.

If this is what disaster does, then the catastrophilia of the right, the palpable glee with which they anticipate the end of days, would seem to have little to offer to survivors. Millions of people regularly have their lives wrecked by disasters large and small, social and personal, acute and chronic, without being radicalised to the right. Yet from another point of view catastrophilia could be a cure for depression. For some of those whose ontological security has been painfully ruptured, it might offer a therapeutic torsion of angst into desire. The Catholic theologian Thomas Merton warned, decades ago, about what could happen to the dim forebodings of humans masquerading as apocalyptic knowledge: 'The pathological fear of the violent end … when sufficiently aroused, actually becomes a thinly disguised hope for the violent end.'[8]

To whom would this appeal? Perhaps none other than the 'little man' of whom Wilhelm Reich wrote in his psychosexual study of prewar fascism. Insofar as he is possessed by 'an amalgam between rebellious emotions and reactionary social ideas' and is 'enslaved and craves authority and is at the same rebellious', he needs a rebellion that protects the social order. The social psychologist Michael Billig, in his study of fascist ideology, found that his subjects were in most ways not psychologically aberrant: they were neither floridly psychotic nor necessarily in the grip of an 'authoritarian personality'. What distinguished them was that, faced with abrupt and unwelcome changes, they tended to personalise the affliction. Our misfortunes are not the result of systems or situations: *someone evil did this to us*. Or, as Michael Barkun put it: '*Nothing happens by accident*. Conspiracy implies a world based on intentionality.' Like the paranoiac described by psychoanalyst Darian Leader, they aim to 'denounce or strike the bad libido in the Other'.[9]

Conspiracism explains the problem in a way that may require bloody revenge, may even entail a radical revision of the fabric of reality, but it still averts the need for radical social change. What needs to be destroyed is not the system, but personnel. And it also means that cataclysmic threat, far from being evaded, is welcomed. Billig suggests that fascists may even enjoy being threatened: 'I … just want to be threatened once,' an interviewee explained. Because then he could 'hit back'.[10]

The emotional advantage of fascism has always been its ability to acknowledge the severity of the disaster, give it a face and 'hit back'. Trump refers to 'American carnage' inflicted by 'globalists'. QAnon propaganda blames 'CRIMINALS' for 'destroyed factories, declining job numbers, sicker people, opioids, destruction of Iraq, Syria and Yemen with pointless war, displacement of people into Europe, ISIS, terrorism, collapsed governments, poverty and genocide'. In the words of Clara Zetkin, fascism 'rouses and sweeps along broad social masses who have lost the earlier security of their existence and with it, often, their belief in social order'.[11] It promises that communal trust and security can be rebuilt, with great bloodshed but at minimal cost to the social order, within the sacred space of a cleansed nation.

II.

If rural Oregonians were looking for a threat, it was raging all around them at temperatures of up to 800°C.[12]

The planet, with its sunshine, organic fuels, oxygen-rich atmosphere, and air crackling with lightning, is built to periodically burn. Lightning strikes the earth 100,000 times a day, and 10 to 20 per cent of these strikes cause a fire. In the Pacific Northwest, during the summer heat, fuels dry out and hot dry winds blow in from the east. A mere spark in these circumstances can trigger a blaze that rips through the forests and brush with teeth of flame metres in length. Wildfires are a natural phenomenon to which, in normal circumstances, ecosystems are adapted. But for the last three decades, the intensity, extent and duration of wildfires in the Northwest have increased due to the hotter temperatures brought on by climate change.[13]

In September 2020, the wildfire swept over the Cascade mountain range in the west of Oregon, was driven up slopes blanketed with fuel-rich pine forests and bears, goats, coyotes and marmots, and was oxygenated and pushed over the cordillera chines by hurricane-strength Pacific winds, until it rolled across the rural planes and forests like lava. The powerful winds blew existing wildfires into megafires and downed power lines to create more fires. This was one of the worst wildfire seasons in Oregon's history, and a deeply surreal, traumatising experience. In whom could the

afflicted trust? In rural Oregon, there is almost no local news, the result of decades of demolition. According to the Northwestern University's Medill School of Journalism, the United States was on track to have lost a third of its newspapers by 2025. Nor is there a compensating increase in quality digital alternatives. What remains for the reality-starved are community pages on Facebook, or apps like Nextdoor.[14]

Along with this degradation of information ecologies, there is the chronic disaster signalled by poverty, addiction, suicide and 'deaths of despair'. Rural Oregon never recovered from the Great Recession of 2008: eight years after the recession, employment was still 8.8 per cent below pre-recession levels. Nor, given the decline of the state's lumber industry, did the work available before the recession pay much. Jobs in the rural parts of Oregon are skewed towards minimum wage. Combined with the lack of public transport and healthcare, this contributes to the high rates of official poverty in the rural counties.[15]

Another casualty of the Great Recession was, for many, the will to live. In a state in which suicide is the eighth leading cause of death, the rate of suicide in rural counties like Deschutes has gone up every year since 2010. Farmers, fishers and loggers are particularly susceptible. The state has the second highest addiction rates in the United States, with alcoholism alone affecting 12 per cent of Oregonians in 2020, just as the Fentanyl addiction crisis was taking off. When Covid-19 arrived in that year, it was particularly brutal in rural counties. While transmission was lower, the rate at which infected people died from the virus – the case fatality ratio – was up to 26 per cent higher than in urban counties. Mental health deteriorated, and those suffering addictions overdosed more often.[16]

Then there are the acute disasters. In the summer of 2020, amid the miseries of the Covid-19 pandemic and after months of mandated lockdowns, many more people than usual cooked outdoors, contributing to a jump in the share of 'human-caused' wildfires from 70 per cent to 90 per cent.[17] In a record wildfire season, a total of 2,027 fires burned, consuming 1,221,324 acres. The amount of protected land burned was thirteen times the average over the previous decade. Over 400,000 people, roughly 10 per cent of the state's population, were forced to evacuate, and thousands of homes were destroyed. Across the Northwest, 33 people were killed in the fires.[18] Three years later, residents were still shaken. 'I still have nightmares

every night,' one said. 'I collapsed,' another explained, after she lost her home. 'Everything after that, trying to fight to get assistance, trying to fight to get information … it was just so emotionally draining.'[19]

With much of the West Coast in flames, some residents refused to evacuate. They had heard that 'Antifa' activists had been deliberately starting the fires as part of a war on conservative, Christian, largely white rural Oregonians. It was 'Domestic Terrorism by paid mercenaries of the Democrat Party'. And residents were willing to risk their lives to stay and fight. Vigilantes set up armed checkpoints. Graffiti warned, 'Looters will be shot.' One man, given a level three evacuation order (meaning leave immediately, or face mortal danger), explained why he refused to leave: 'I'm protecting my city. If I see people doing crap, I'm gonna hurt them.' The rumours, despite police disavowals and FBI rebuttals, gained quasi-official clout. In Clackamas County, a sheriff's deputy warned on local radio that 'Antifa motherfuckers are out causing hell, and there's a lot of lives at stake and there's a lot of people's property at stake because these guys got some vendetta.' Soon, the claims were being retweeted by President Trump.[20]

This was a spontaneous, collective apocalyptic fantasy. It began to emerge from multiple Oregon-based social media accounts on 4 September: third-hand reports that 'Antifa is in town', vague footage or photographs with sinister narratives of activists arrested with 'axes and gas cans' attached, a description of a local radio broadcast reporting that Antifa had shot at firefighters. Antifa, short for Antifascist Action, is a decentralised movement whose supporters physically confront the far right wherever they mobilise. But in these rumours, they were more like an insurgent conspiracy. That image of Antifa sedition was well-established by the time the rumours began. In the summer of 2017, conspiracist YouTubers had begun predicting an Antifa uprising on 4 November that would terrorise white people, Christians and Trump supporters. Though the insurrection never happened, the idea filtered into wider far-right cultures. It was incorporated into the QAnon subculture on 4chan, where 'anons' began to speculate – based on the postings of someone claiming to have 'Q' level clearance in the government – that Hillary Clinton was about to be arrested, and martial law declared: another prediction whose inevitable failure did nothing to diminish its imaginative hold on believers.[21]

In 2020, the Black Lives Matter uprising – the largest protest movement in US history, which erupted after the police killing of George Floyd – lent new heft to the idea. Across forty-one cities, there had been rumours of busloads of Antifa infiltrating Black Lives Matter with plans to incite violence and loot. Once again, the story was driven by conspiracist YouTubers, but it was sometimes given 'official' endorsement, from sources as varied as the Sioux Falls Chamber of Commerce, President Trump and QAnon-supporting Congressional candidate Marjorie Taylor Greene. What is more, leaked documents showed that similar baseless claims had been pursued by police, the FBI, the Department of Homeland Security and other official agencies in the months before the wildfires. Nor was the idea of activists starting fires completely invented. There were dozens of cases of arson during the Black Lives Matter protests, and some activists from Seattle had even been arrested in Kenosha, Wisconsin, with gasoline cans.[22]

Even so, the rumours, their spontaneous emergence from multiple sources and their tenacity in the face of police rebuttal required some explanation. The first reason for residents' suspicion was that this was one of the most destructive wildfire seasons on record for the state. As one post quoted by geographer Laura Pulido insisted: 'These fires aren't just popping up out of nowhere by chance, yes some started from power line being down etc, this many fires at once happening this broadly is too strange.' The poster was correct. Some fires did start from downed power lines: in 2023, PacifiCorp was forced to pay $90 million in damages for its reckless decision to keep powerlines on during a powerful wind storm. But the extent and severity of the fires was indeed 'too strange'. There was nothing natural about the disaster. As Ben Wisner and his colleagues have demonstrated, there is no pure 'natural disaster' since all of them are conditioned by 'social vulnerability'. The vulnerabilities of rural Oregonians were socially caused by forces more abstract and remote than even the federal government. There was, moreover, an eerie sense of 'temporal compression' in events, as acute crises followed in quick succession, from the Great Recession to the pandemic. In 2020 alone, Covid-19 and the hardships of mass death and lockdown had been followed by an anti-racist uprising which conservative Oregonians would experience as a threatening breakdown in the social order. This sense of time speeding up is a typical experience in apocalyptic moments.[23]

It is unlikely, even if they could trust in a vibrant local news system, that conservative Oregonians would have blamed climate change for the apocalyptic fires. Many residents wanted, and were evidently excited by, a threat that more closely resembled an enemy they could literally fight. One typical post suggested that Antifa was fighting dirty because it was 'the only way they can fight' against 'more conservative/rural folks' who 'would hand them their asses in an altercation'. Climate change is an abstraction whose sources can only be described with further abstractions, like 'fossil capitalism'. Abstractions can neither be sued nor shot at. Besides, many Oregonians think environmentalism is a pretext for the liberal state to control their lives. A similar pattern had already unfolded during wildfire season in rural northern California in 2018. Many locals, reluctant to blame climate change, shared rumours blaming the federal government and its environmentalist policies. One rumour claimed that an off-duty Cal Fire bulldozer operator had offered to use his bulldozer to control the blaze only to be warned off by a government agent, a park ranger, because it would detrimentally impact native species. In one version of the rumour, he was even threatened with arrest for trespassing on federal land.[24]

However, in this case the dependence on social industry platforms like Facebook and Nextdoor was necessary to create a fabric of belief in the rumour. Belief is not an isolated act. We all believe in thousands of facts, though we are ignorant of the evidence for them. In believing, we give credit to someone in confidence that it will be repaid. And part of our reason for doing so is that we know others believe the same thing. There is always what Michel de Certeau called a 'secret network' of believers sustaining any belief, whether it is in God, the media, science or the national currency. Given the collapse of belief in 'mainstream media' and the breakdown of the social alliances that sustain belief, trust can widely be reposed in 'alternative sources' if a sufficient threshold of support is spontaneously given to their lay theories: this is the logic of social contagion. The sense that, suddenly, 'everyone is saying the same thing' is another dimension of apocalyptic experience.[25]

In United States history, successful rumours centring on plots have almost always been about race. Terry Ann Knopf describes 'reports that slaves planned to burn down the city of New York; alleged meetings to encourage slaves to cut their masters' throats; predictions of more runaway

slaves, John Brown–type raids and slave insurrections'. But the wildfire rumours didn't identify black insurgency as the main threat, even if they were haunted by the spectral 'white genocide' prophesied by the far right. Rather, in common with a long tradition of American conspiracist thought, they saw an elite hand behind events. It was the 'Democrat Party', the lying 'mainstream media' and 'the system' which 'protects antifa and BLM terrorists'.[26]

It wouldn't be enough, then, to shoot Antifa activists even if any could be found, any more than it would be enough for right-wing activists to shoot Black Lives Matter protesters or ram them with their vehicles (there were at least fifty recorded instances of this during the BLM protests).[27] By implication, to stop the catastrophic onslaught of ruling-class terrorism against conservative whites, the entire basis of liberal power would have to be destroyed.

III.

Wherever conspiracy theories suddenly appear, we wonder: Who is behind this? Who is pulling the strings? We become conspiracy theorists about conspiracy theories. We think, to use the terms of journalist Alexi Mostrous, that conspiracists can be divided between 'victims' and 'manipulators'.[28]

The wishful implication is that there are cynical producers and gullible consumers. Those who intentionally mislead, for profit or attention, and those who are innocently misled. The latter can be saved if only we can discredit the former. Perhaps when mass media was a one-way system, and propaganda worked on the principle of suggestion, this was plausible. Although even then, Hannah Arendt pointed out that mass propaganda could always assume a willingness on the part of its audience to believe the worst. And if a lie was exposed, they would 'protest that they had known all along that the statement was a lie and would admire the leaders for their superior tactical cleverness'.[29] On the internet, we are both producers and consumers, and no one is innocent.

Conspiracy theory is, from one angle, rumour metastasised. And rumour is not just lay theory. A rumour is a dream, and a dream is a wish-fulfilment. Or, to put it another way, the rumour stages the fulfilment of an unacceptable wish, a wish that one doesn't wish for. Rumours express, and

resolve in their dreamlike idiom, a profound emotional conflict. Rumours would not metastasise into conspiracy theories, accumulating and winning souls, were it not for a mass of people yearning for what they offer. Such yearnings do not, of course, emerge fully armed and ready for battle with the deep state. But for rumours to be converted to profit and political capital, there must be people willing to be converted. They must feel in their bones that they need to change. 'We want to be converted', psychoanalyst Adam Phillips writes, 'by those people who can apparently resolve our most unbearable conflicts.'[30]

Take, for example, a recent rumour about a transgender 'bathroom predator'. The American right has been obsessed with this idea well before there was any evidence of anyone ever being raped in a bathroom by a trans woman, let alone evidence of this being a *trend*. In 2021, *Fox News* journalists, Republican lawyers and Trump activists were electrified by rumour of a confirmed sighting of such a beast. According to the rumour, a boy who identified as 'nonbinary' had raped a girl in the female bathroom at school. This came just as schools were about to introduce a policy permitting transgender children to access bathrooms fitting their gender identity. There had indeed been an alleged rape, but the part about the child being 'non-binary' was false. The assault looked more like date rape, a depressingly familiar tale, than the right's fantasy about transgender predators.[31] The boy's behaviour, this suggested, had more to do with the ways boys are socialised to think about girls and sex, than with transgender rights. But if American liberals would see this as 'toxic masculinity', a surplus product of the sexual order that transphobes wish to protect, the American right needed it to be a crisis of *toxic femininity*: of boys groomed and perverted by an insidious trans agenda.

Where, in this example of instrumentalised rumour-mongering, are the 'victims' and 'manipulators'? It is difficult to see *Fox News* and Republican activists, for example, as mere saps taken in by an angry father (the apparent source of the detail about the alleged rapist being non-binary). And what of innumerable other rumours that have gained widespread assent? The rumour, leading to a racist massacre in East St Louis, Illinois, in 1919, that local black people were plotting to murder and rape thousands of whites? The claim, in Orléans in 1969, that Jewish merchants were drugging women customers in order to sell them into slavery? The story, triggering the Gujarat pogrom in northern India in 2002, that Muslims had

firebombed a train with Hindu pilgrims aboard? Or the so-called #pizzagate rumour according to which Democrats were running a child trafficking ring through underground tunnels linked to a Washington pizzeria, that led to an armed assault on the Comet Ping Pong restaurant? Can it really be that in each case there is one devious, attention-seeking author, and everyone else is an innocent dupe? No.

Belief is never innocent. As the theologian (and aforementioned psychoanalyst) Tad DeLay suggests, 'belief is fantasy' which rationalises behaviour rooted in more opaque impulses. This is not necessarily a criticism, for it is impossible to sustain any kind of social or political life without shared fantasy. It is through fantasy that we organise and sustain our shared desires, and the collapse of collective fantasies is not unrelated to the detumescence of desire and the pervasive depression described in chapter 1. Conspiracy theory, to that extent, is responsive to the depression and boredom of late capitalist life, suggesting hidden or unexhausted possibilities in an exhausted age. It models desire and makes life exciting again. But equally, no one is compelled to participate in a fantasy. If I agree to fantasise about gruesome, erotically charged scenarios for whose reality I've been given no good evidence, I am not simply lacking 'critical skills' or 'media literacy': the fantasy is doing something for me. It is staging something that I want, even if I don't want to want it. And if that fantasy is then adopted by numerous others, for no good reason, then the wish obviously isn't reducible to personal psychopathology but is rooted in a shared social condition.

For example, following the global financial crash in 2008 and the ensuing disasters of austerity, there was a remarkable increase in the volume of anti-Soros fantasies. George Soros had first appeared as a whipping-post and sin-eater for the right in Eastern Europe after the collapse of the USSR. The antisemitic nationalism bursting out of the decrepit integument of Stalinism's formally rationalist but arbitrary tyranny was catapulted into the stratosphere by the catastrophic 'shock doctrine' policies imposed on the hitherto state-managed economies at the behest of the International Monetary Fund. This enriched a new *nomenklatura*, but it also caused hundreds of thousands of excess deaths and a spike in anomic crimes like homicide.

In Hungary, Soros's birthplace, the consequences were far from the worst, but real wages nonetheless fell by 14 per cent between 1990 and

1992, while homicides increased by 43 per cent between 1989 and 1991. Soros had launched his Open Society Fund in 1979, aiming to promote Karl Popper's concept of the 'open society' based on capitalism and liberal democracy, and he had worked with Hungary's János Kádár regime and General Wojciech Jaruzelski in Poland to promote market-based reform. Ironically, one of his beneficiaries was his future malefactor Viktor Orbán, who received an Open Society grant to study at Pembroke College, Oxford. From the early 1990s, rightist Hungarian media worked to 'expose' Soros's secret goal of crushing 'Hungarian national consciousness'. István Csurka, a leading politician of the Hungarian Democratic Forum, described Soros as a puppet of 'Jerusalem'. His ally Gyula Zacsek said that Soros was building an 'empire'. Similar tropes surfaced in neighbouring Romania, where the nationalist far right was much more mainstream. What made Soros particularly offensive to the Hungarian right, dedicated to restoring the honour of Admiral Miklós Horthy's interwar regime, is that he is a survivor of the Holocaust in a country where Horthy's government had been preoccupied with ridding the country of its Jews and had handed over up to half a million of them to the Nazis.

Yet it wasn't until the 2010s that such theories went global. In Russia, as Putin allied with the far right to defeat his opponents on the left, Soros was blamed for anti-government movements. In Hungary, as Orbán imposed a constitutional rupture that stuffed the courts, took control of the media and rolled back parliamentary consultation, Soros was blamed for trying to bring 'one million Muslims' into Europe 'every year'. Since then, his influence everywhere has been blamed for everything that the right loathes. Trump blamed him for orchestrating protests against the confirmation of Brett Kavanaugh as a Supreme Court judge. Benjamin Netanyahu accuses him of spreading anti-Likud propaganda in Israel, and his son Yair Netanyahu alleges that he is 'destroying Israel from the inside'. Romania's Sorin Grindeanu administration blames him for anti-corruption protests. Vladimir Putin blames Russia's civil society protests on Soros-funded NGOs. In Hungary, where Soros was born, Viktor Orbán and his Fidesz party portray Soros as the 'puppet master' of Muslim migration to Eastern Europe. Every 12 August, on George Soros's birthday, the international far right now celebrates 'International Day Against George Soros'.[32] Soros is a useful foil for the far right because he is demonstrably rich, powerful and willing to use that power to support liberal causes. Yet

the rumours could never have taken root if multiple economic and social crises, not to mention the unpunished ruling-class crime wave preceding the financial crash, hadn't established the orectic conditions for their uptake. In other words, believers weren't mere dupes: they had to want it.

From another perspective, conspiracy theory is myth. Myth, notwithstanding its conspiracist iterations and the historic role of myth in fascist ideology, is not necessarily a lie. As Mary Midgley puts it, myths are 'imaginative patterns … that suggest particular ways of interpreting the world'. They circle around, and spawn symbols about, the enigmatic aspects of existence, such as birth, sex and death. Racist myths, such as the 'black rapist' or the 'Indian cannibal', usually advert to one of these enigmas. They are nearly always rooted, writes Karen Armstrong, 'in the experience of death and the fear of extinction', as in the contemporary myth of 'white genocide'.[33]

The 'bathroom predator' is clearly a myth in this sense. Notwithstanding the pseudoscience of transphobes, according to whom gender is biologically determined, the myth does not actually pertain to biology. It is about policing the symbolic, social aspects of gender. The 'bathroom predator' epitomises the threat that transphobic literature says trans women represent: a deviant male occupation of, and ultimate perversion and violation of, female space. This can be seen for what it is: not only myth but masturbatory fantasy. And, like all such fantasies, according to Jamieson Webster, it deals elliptically with questions about the meaning of sex, man, woman, fathers, mothers, insemination and birth.[34]

In this respect, the 'bathroom predator' myth bears a striking affinity with the 'castrated boy' urban legend that first became popular with mothers in North America in the sixties. In most versions of this legend, a five-year-old boy visiting a shopping centre with his mother had gone to the bathroom. After some time passed, the worried mother sent someone to investigate, and the boy was found lying on the floor, bloody and castrated. In most, but not all, versions of this story the assailant was black and the victim white. That no such thing ever happened didn't stop the legend popping up all over the place, presumably because of its almost clichéd Oedipality (the perpetrator appears to be a stand-in for the father, who is himself but an emissary of the mother's conflicted desire).[35] As we'll see in chapter 3, conspiracy theories are obsessed with such erotic scenarios.

The most potent modern political myths, however, are about power and revolution. At the origin of modern political conspiracism lies a myth of subversive power, first fabricated in response to the French revolution. In 1797, two books appeared simultaneously. These were Abbé Barruel's five-volume *Mémoire pour servietterr à l'histoire du jacobinisme*, and John Robison's *Proofs of a conspiracy against all the religions and governments of Europe, carried on in the secret meetings of Free Masons, Illuminati and Reading Societies*. Both attributed the revolution to a centuries-old conspiracy of secret societies (from the Order of Templars to the Freemasons), responsible for an assault on religion and political authority. Here was a world government forming in secret. By 1806, the element of Jewish conspiracy had been added by a mysterious correspondent named J. B. Simonini, who told Barruel that he had been privy to their plotting, and that they had accumulated gold and silver to pay for a revolt that would destroy the ruling houses of Europe and dispossess Christians.[36]

This theory of totalitarianism *avanta la laettere* is the template from which modern conspiracy narratives – from the *Protocols of the Elders of Zion* to the 'New World Order' – are cut. It prefigures in a strange way the 'anti-fascist' fascism of, for example, far-right Covid denialists who perceive themselves to be rebels against an insidious totalitarianism exemplified by masking (and some of whom, notwithstanding their involvement in far-right movements, even called themselves 'The White Rose' after the nonviolent opposition movement in Nazi Germany).[37] Contemporary far-right theories of totalitarian takeover, of a Covid-induced 'Fourth Reich' or a communist coup, are to this extent only rehashing and remediating centuries-old material. One might ask if there's a consolation in such beliefs, which imply that at least someone is in charge who knows exactly what is going on.

Such demonological disaster dreams are not always or necessarily a 'warrant for genocide', as Norman Cohn put it in his history of anti-semitic conspiracy theory. The enormous cultural appeal of conspiracism, and the various manifestations of conspiratorial evil (intelligence agencies in *The Conversation*, corporations in *The Parallax View*, an alien ruling class in *They Live*, the Catholic church in *The Da Vinci Code*) show it to be more politically ambivalent than such a verdict would suggest. Even if conspiracism tends to need monsters, its fantasies needn't always be racist or exclusionary: the conspiracist subcultures of the 1990s, for example,

were infused with an ambiguous openness to the 'alt' and the 'alien', and they flowed messily into the anti-war movement of the following decade.

Conspiracy theory today, says Fredric Jameson, is an attempt to represent the 'social totality' at the level of fantasy in a way that evades 'liberal and anti-political censorship'. However deranged the theory, it can radically call into question the dominant institutions which, indeed, have much to answer for. In the high-tech folktales of contemporary conspiracism, blending magic, science and technology, it is the pharmaceutical giants, the telecommunications firms, and the billionaire Bill Gates who stand for evil. The Covid-19 vaccine, according to Naomi Wolf, is a dehumanising form of biological warfare, gumming up our spiritual works, destroying our capacity to love, even removing our distinctly human scent: we become ghosts. The new 5G towers, says David Icke, are pillars of power blasting out an 'electro-magnetic technologically generated soup of radiation toxicity' which destroys the immune systems of the elderly and causes the deaths falsely attributed to Covid-19. Vaccines, according to the ID2020 conspiracy theory, contain a radio frequency identification chip – dubbed 'the mark of the beast' – which allows Bill Gates to keep track of every living human being on earth.[38]

There is some metaphorical truth in the dialectical reversals of this dreamwork, in which medicine makes us sick and telecommunications keep us apart. Pharmaceutical giants do not only falsify test results – they also manufacture the perception of illness: 'disease-mongering' has long been a notorious commercial practice. As for communications, it's not difficult to see how social industry platforms, professing to bring us together, also function to keep us isolated: 'alone together', as Sherry Turkle put it.[39] It is also simply the case that big tech, personified in this myth by a Satanic Bill Gates, keeps track of our movements. However, the question is why these problems should be metaphorised in the first place. What is the *yield* there?

As Naomi Klein points out, the too-obvious liberal snark that 'the tracking devices are in our phones, stupid' doesn't begin to get to the root of it: they already know that. But the dreamwork has transformed political problems into erotic fantasies of bodily penetration, the expression both of a desire and a counterattack upon desire. But what desire could be at work here? The Freudian interpretation of dream-work is clear that the unconscious desire is not disclosed in the 'latent dream content', however unpleasant or erotic it may be. Rather, the desire, as Slavoj Žižek puts it,

‘intercalates itself in the interspace between the latent thought and the manifest text’. It is in the work of distortion, the mechanisms of metonymy and metaphor, that unconscious desire secretes itself. That is happening in *this* dreamwork, say when the idea of big tech tracking us becomes a fantasy of penetration; the effect is to transform a network of often rivalrous powers, both capitalist and state, whose inability to master the systems they benefit from has been exposed in multiple crises, into a single omnipotent and omniscient command centre. What is at stake here is the conspiracist’s contradictory desire for totalitarianism, as a solution to the crisis of authority.[40]

It is unsurprising that in practice these myths exert a rightward pull, just as Roland Barthes finds that myths in general accumulate on the right. Contemporary conspiracism often works ‘diagonally’, to use the terminology of Germany’s anti-lockdown Querdenken movement. It engages concerns that might be held by educated, sceptical progressives but draws them rapidly into the world view of the apocalyptic right. Querdenken is an excellent example of this trend. The leadership of the movement was composed of assorted individuals from the esoteric, antisemitic or neo-Nazi right. But its mobilising myth, of a totalitarian fusion of state and pharmaceutical power threatening individual liberty by intruding on the body, appealed to many who had been vaguely progressive in the neoliberal era.

At the outset of the anti-lockdown protests in Germany, when tens of thousands gathered in Berlin in August 2020, most Querdenken supporters had little interest in the far right. They had previously either abstained or voted for parties like the Greens or Die Linke. But now, they were seeking a new political expression: 92 per cent said they wouldn’t vote for any ‘mainstream’ party. They were highly educated on average and strongly middle class, with the self-employed particularly over-represented. They were sceptical of government intrusion, of vaccines, of the media and of scientists. To an extent, as William Callison and Quinn Slobodian put it, they were working together ‘to be left alone’.[41]

This desire might have been perfectly compatible with *bien pensant* progressivism during a neoliberal era dominated by the myth of the sovereign individual. Myth it was, for the individual was never so weak, never so buffeted by impersonal, abstract forces like ‘the market’. But in the structure of feeling generated by the myth, one always had to calculate

one's odds against other people: it was always others who represented risk. In the time of the pandemic, we learned to see ourselves as a potential risk to other people, a stance that required personal sacrifices. The sovereign individual became abruptly countercultural. The panicked sense of lost sovereignty resonated with the prevailing sociophobia of the far right, entailed in the assertion that *any* communal abridgment of individual freedoms is despotic: 'social distancing is communism' and 'masks are muzzles'. Nor is this entirely novel: the fear of the individual being destroyed by the masses united fascists from Pierre Drieu de La Rochelle to José Antonio Primo de Rivera, the founder of the Falange. Rochelle aimed to 'kill off statism by making use of the state'. For Rivera, 'We are anti-Marxists because we are terrified … of being an inferior animal in an ant-nest.'[42]

In the thriving Telegram subcultures through which hundreds of thousands of Querdenken supporters got their information, the material shared was disproportionately from neofascist or QAnon sources. The movement was a conversion-machine, transforming panic over threatened individualism into authoritarian desire. Whether or not it contributed to the murder of a German petrol station attendant for denying service to a customer who refused to wear a mask, or provoked the numerous death-threats against German doctors who supported the vaccine, or induced Querdenken Telegram users to plan the assassination of a Saxony state leader for supporting restrictions on the unvaccinated, it can be seen as a decisive moment in a wider rightward shift that, by 2023, saw the far-right Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) surge ahead of the Social Democrats to second place in the polls.[43]

The over-representation of the middle class in such movements is telling, since the most potent myth on the right is of a 'virtuous middle' squeezed between a treacherous elite and a vile underclass. In whatever form it takes, reactionary myth is essentially countersubversive, as it blames this nefarious alliance between predatory elites and insurgent infrahumanity for destroying a happier traditional society. There is an elective affinity between these countersubversive fables, targeting Jews, Muslims, women, people of colour, outsiders, radical workers and communists, and conspiracist demonology. Both engage in what Joel Kovel and Michael Rogin describe, using the terms of Kleinian psychoanalysis, as 'splitting': where the unacceptable, violent and dysfunctional parts of society are split

away and projected onto an intrusive outsider who must be done away with.[44]

In a strange dialectic, the conspiracists often end up supporting a version of the authoritarianism they claim to oppose. The disaster dreams of the afflicted can be seen in this way as a kind of imaginative foreplanning, a psychic preparation for bloodletting.

IV.

The wishful idea that conspiracists can be divided between the dupes and the duplicitous is a forlorn attempt to defend what Jean Baudrillard called ‘the reality principle’.

According to Baudrillard, the ‘reality principle’, by which it was possible to differentiate between ‘real’ and ‘fake’, was under assault. Already, as he was writing in the early 1980s, humanity was drowning in a sea of commodity-images, from Hollywood to Disneyland, which didn’t so much represent an underlying reality as algorithmically model a new *hyperreality*. In this domain, there was no difference between real and imitation.[45] Baudrillard could not have foreseen the rise of the social industry platforms like Facebook and TikTok, through which billions of people now conduct their social lives, and on which social life is mediated by a flow of digital images which are collectively produced by users. The simulacrum has taken over in an unprecedented way. It used to be said that the internet was not ‘real life’, but for billions it is their lived reality, and often a more vivid reality than the physical objects or loved ones around them.

The strategy of governments and legacy media aiming to assert the reality principle consists of effortful ‘fact-checking’ and the promotion of ‘media literacy’. This campaign, being waged on the terrain of the simulacrum, is generally about as efficacious as a chocolate teapot. Congruent with that approach, however, some recent studies suggest that the reason people believe disinformation on the internet is because they are simply too trusting: they are the dupes, ready to be misled by the duplicitous. According to the findings, older generations lacking media literacy are less likely to check their sources. They assume that any authoritative-sounding claim must be accurate. By implication, generational

improvements in literacy will make life harder for the purveyors of falsehood.[46]

One problem with such studies is that they're based on the self-reported habits of users, who aren't necessarily reliable. Other studies using different methods find that younger users are just as likely to share disinformation, as would be suggested by young people on TikTok explaining that Helen Keller didn't exist, claiming to be survivors of a form of cult abuse known as 'RAMCOA' (ritual abuse, mind control and organised abuse, an update on the discredited notion of Satanic Ritual Abuse), or joining the grim world of Andrew Tate fandom.[47] A bigger problem by far is that trust is unlikely to be the source of readiness to believe disinformation.

Knowledge is a matter of faith. Most of our knowledge depends on trust in others, and trust must be at least partially blind. This is counterintuitive: How can we know anything about which we are in the dark? But it is true, and true above all for scientists who depend on the professionalism and ethics of their colleagues, particularly as each field of study grows more complex. For example, a study of the measurement of charm particles needed ninety-nine authors with different specialities because of the complexity of each step in the process of measurement. They could not have achieved anything if they couldn't trust their colleagues. As John Hardwig put it in his study of scientific knowledge:

> Those who do not trust cannot know; those who do not trust cannot have the best evidence for their beliefs … Knowing, then, is often not a privileged psychological state. If it is a privileged state at all, it is a privileged social state.[48]

What applies to the scientists certainly describes the rest of us, who must accept on trust a wide range of claims about war, the natural environment, science, world history or economy. We may have excellent objective reasons for trusting our sources, but trust is also anchored in a form of collective fantasy life. Social trust depends on a fantasy of shared values and history, a public space which Lacanian psychoanalysts call the 'big Other', and which can be the measure of our lives and the sanction of our decisions. This, the very idea that we have anything in common at all

outside our cultural tribes, is what has been breaking down in recent years.[49]

If knowledge is a 'social state', then the degradation of knowledge is a consequence of that social corrosion. In the empirical sciences, trust has been eroded by the proliferation of fraudulent scholarship, papers ghostwritten by corporations and the collusion of a supposedly independent academia in the marketing strategies of companies they partner with. In media, trust has been eroded by the obvious political biases of owners, the influence of advertisers, the fusion of news with infotainment, the rise of 'churnalism' and the social industry platforms that thrive on turning attention surges generated by addictive disinfotainment into advertising revenue. In everyday life, the decay of interpersonal trust, which appears to be slightly more advanced among younger generations, makes even the testimony of our neighbours doubtful.[50] What remains in this situation, pitifully euphemised as 'post-truth'? The final, fiduciary trust is in the transparency of reality to conscious reflection: if no one else will tell me the truth, I can at least see it for myself. And what is left of that when the simulacrum takes over?

Historical fascism reposed its trust in myth. Disaster nationalism, coming of age in the era of the internet, trusts in the simulacrum. For the interwar fascist movement, truth was not whatever could be discerned by the empirical sciences, whose findings were merely happenstantially veridical. Nor was it whatever passed through the grid of rational intelligibility. As Federico Finchelstein describes it, truth was identical with 'a transcendental myth rooted in the collective unconscious' of a people which awaited embodiment in 'the consciousness of a leader'. The ultimate expressions of this truth were not in thought, but in action: paramilitary violence, pogroms, coups d'état, murderous cleansings.[51]

That still adequately describes the neofascists clinging doggedly to versions of the 'Jewish-Masonic world conspiracy', right-wing Zionists with their 'blood and soil' mythos and the Hindu nationalists with their *Hindutva* fetish. But disaster nationalism today is distinguished by its effort to turn a pastiche of familiar myths into hyperreality. It begins by leveraging a radical distrust of reality arising from the way in which social relations are increasingly mediated by digital images. Supporters of Donald Trump can claim, for example, that recorded conversations in which he admits to possession of classified documents are likely to be 'deepfakes'.

This was implausible but, in a context in which the Ron DeSantis campaign in the Republican primary was caught using AI-generated photos of Trump hugging Dr Anthony Fauci, not intrinsically absurd.[52] Everything is then potentially a 'deepfake'. Everything from terror attacks on the World Trade Centre and the Pentagon, to Obama's citizenship, the scientific consensus on climate change, the Covid-19 pandemic, the moon landing, the 2020 presidential election results and even (or especially) the Holocaust can be 'seen through' as manipulated realities.

For instance, a cover story on the UK's far-right conspiracist newspaper, *The Light*, inquires: 'Are we all being brainwashed?' It asks: 'How would you know, if everyone was undergoing the same manipulation … that you were actually in a majority cult?' It goes on to cite examples such as the 'fake climate crisis' and a situation in which men 'can declare themselves women'. This is relatively mild fare for a paper which regularly publishes Holocaust denial.[53] The suspicion is that consensus reality is a massive, mind-bending con in which most people are blind participants: they, the sheeple, are the dupes.

And there is always a point in conspiracism where its anti-elitism morphs into suspicion of the masses. For example, a recent addition to the far right's conceptual arsenal is the theory of 'mass formation'. This describes a process in which people are atomised, pulverised and reduced to meaninglessness by technology, a mechanistic Enlightenment ideology, and the rule of 'a pseudoscientific discourse of numbers, data and statistics'. In such a fractured state, the masses are formed and fused together by a totalitarian ideology in which both leaders and masses are 'hypnotised'. They internalise the ethic of the informant and become hideously conformist and intolerant of difference. Developed by the Belgian clinical psychologist Mattias Desmet, the theory of mass formation is mainly derived from a misreading of antiquated crowd psychology.[54] Astonishingly, though, its chilling picture of mass conformity is adduced to explain such *mysteriously uniform behaviour* as people wearing masks or queueing for vaccines during a plague.

Thus far it seems that despite its pseudo-Gnostic strike against consensus reality, disaster nationalism upholds the reality principle. Describing a simulated world, it holds open the possibility of an intrepid few discovering the truth and enlightening the people. But far-right conspiracism has lately discovered a latent possibility in the simulacrum:

participatory disinfotainment. Rather than rebel against an artificially produced reality, it offers the chance, through a live-action role-playing scenario, of participating in its production.

v.

QAnon is more than a global phenomenon of recreational conspiracism. After all, what exactly is so compulsive about it? Its core claims, that the world is ruled by a Satanic cabal of communist paedophiles, that Donald Trump is leading a campaign by the 'good guys' in power to oust the cabal, and that the latter are always tantalisingly on the brink of a final bloody victory in which Trump will be installed by the military as president-for-life, might look to the uninitiated like garish entertainment rather than the eclectic millenarian religion that it is. Yet it has not only recruited millions of believers, but utterly upended their lives, alienated them from their families and induced dreams of gory civil war. As a recanting QAnoner put it, from the inside it looked as if 'everyone else was living in a dream world'.[55]

QAnon is a conversion-machine designed by no single hand, turning agnostic thrill-seekers into devotees of the apocalypse, transforming the ideological debris of conspiracism into a cohesive authoritarian subculture and translating the attentional surges thereby generated into profit for far-right entrepreneurs. All efforts to locate a demiurgic manipulator behind all this have failed. There appears, for a start, to have been more than one 'Q' posting elliptical 'drops' on Reddit and then 8chan. Even if the identity of the original 'Q Clearance Patriot' could definitively be proved, it would add little, because 'Q' was just the latest in a throng of supposed high-level intelligence operatives (FBIAnon, HLIAnon, and so on) purportedly leaking classified material to random users on Reddit and 8chan. 'Q' just got lucky. Even were there just one mastermind, QAnon would have had limited impact without an assortment of conspiracy entrepreneurs who knew how to promote it.

Shortly after Q's first posts, for example, Tracy Diaz, a small-time conspiracy YouTuber, was approached by a Redditor named Coleman Rogers and a South African web programmer named Paul Furber with a proposal to promote Q's posts. Their motives may not have been pecuniary

at first, but Diaz was an effective promoter. From her assiduous postings and videos, in which she suggested that Q's prophesies sounded 'legit', she accumulated 90,000 subscribers and 8 million views. At that level, YouTube starts paying out. When QAnon went viral, Rogers and his wife, Christina Urso, launched a twenty-four-hour livestreamed YouTube channel called Patriot Soapbox. Soon after, they registered it as a limited liability corporation. Another conspiracy entrepreneur, Jim Watkins, is likely to have been one of those posting as 'Q'. Watkins had experience in this, having accumulated profits from running an Asian porn site, and a far-right message board named 2channel. His company, N.T. Technology, hosted 8chan while 'Q' was posting there, and since Watkins' company took 60 per cent of 8chan's profits in exchange for hosting, QAnon was extremely profitable for him. The evidence suggests that, for a while at least, he either composed the drops attributed to 'Q' or knew who did.[56]

As QAnon expanded, it drew the attention of an emerging 'alt-tech' scene, eager to secede from the tech giants that had capitulated to the 'woke' and capitalise on the demand for a stigmatised form of right-wing socialising. There was profit in the prophesy, both capital and souls to be accumulated. For example, Gab's commercial strategy, declared in its 2018 annual report, was to draw audiences attracted to Breitbart and Infowars. This was successful in that among Gab's users was Robert Bowers, the man behind the Tree of Life Synagogue massacre. And, when Facebook and Twitter declared a crackdown on QAnon accounts, Gab publicly welcomed the outcasts with their favourite hashtag: #WWG1WGA (where we go one, we go all).

Parler, likewise, positioned itself to capitalise when the delivery network service Cloudflare finally withdrew its support for 8chan over a string of lone wolf attacks by users who had posted their manifestos on the platform. Launched in September 2018 with investment from the billionaire Mercer family and the millionaire YouTuber and media personality Dan Bongino, Parler initially tried to soften its rightist edge to appease Amazon Web Services, which hosted it, and Apple, which permitted its app to be downloaded from the App Store. It positioned itself as a space for the 'free speech absolutist' and, to really sell it, offered $20,000 to the first liberal pundit gullible or opportunistic enough to sign up. When 8chan was taken down, Parler was one of the first to profit from exiled QAnoners. By November 2020, driving home the cynicism of their 'free speech' pitch,

Parler was overtly affiliated with the Trump campaign's effort to overturn the election results, declaring that 'a premature coronation' of Biden 'would be contributing to the spread of misinformation'. This was not just a political move, but extremely savvy market positioning: the platform doubled its base in a few weeks, reaching 11 million users. It became a hub of #StoptheSteal agitation by senior Republicans and rightist celebrities. In the aftermath of the January 2020 'insurrection', until the platform was shut down by Amazon, Apple, Cloudflare and Google which were sadly no longer able to profit from incitement, downloads of the app soared.[57]

Nor were minor grifters and alt-tech platforms the main profiteers from QAnon's politics of apocalyptic revenge. In addition to the profits flowing to the companies owning the infrastructure, the big tech platforms were if anything more important than 8chan and Parler. In 2020, it was found that Facebook had over 3 million QAnon users. And in addition to the advertising revenue generated from those users, it also accepted hundreds of ads posted on behalf of or praising QAnon. In one month alone, these brought in $12,000. Twitter also profited: just the top dozen qAnon-supporting accounts on its platform reached 1.5 million users. While Facebook banned overtly QAnon-related pages and groups, it continued to host 'Stop the Steal' pages and was the main hub for organising what became the 'insurrection'.[58]

Both Facebook and Twitter (*ante* Musk) have, since the summer of 2020, reluctantly begun to remove QAnon content, and in so doing have exposed the extent to which they were implicated in its growth. For example, while Twitter left untouched many of the larger QAnon-supporting accounts because they belonged to prominent politicians or journalists, it had already removed 70,000 such pages by March 2021. This is congruent with the pattern of behaviour shown by the larger social industry platforms. Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and PayPal all benefited for years from a highly profitable relationship with far-right celebrities like Tommy Robinson, Alex Jones, Stefan Molyneux, Gavin MacInnes and Richard Spencer and a broad network of white nationalists, neo-Nazis, Holocaust deniers, men's rights activists and violent Islamophobes. The more they drew fascinated attention, the more the platforms profited. The more the platforms profited, the more incentive they had to enable these groups to grow. Only when the political cost of maintaining the relationship exceeded the costs of ending it did they change course.

The decisive constituent in all of this is the users. They were the active drivers of the ferment. They have not only hung on, but doubled down, every time their prophesy 'failed'. In trying to explain this, many commentators have referred to a classic study of a UFO cult, *When Prophecy Fails*, by psychologist Leon Festinger and his colleagues. They found that the failure of the group's prophesies only led followers to double down on their investment in the core belief. Their belief was akin to the sunk investment fallacy experienced by stock traders: the more they invested in losing stock, the more they felt they had to lose by giving up. Subsequent studies, however, haven't borne this out.[59]

It is unlikely that QAnon participants see the prophesy as having failed: the precise what, when and how of predicted events is contingent detail, amenable to correction. They do not doubt that the prophesy, which sustains their expansive, heterogeneous texture of conspiracist claims, will be fulfilled. And they are not wholly deluded in this. Dreams, after all, have an alarming propensity to come true, if rarely in the way the dreamer intended. A dream is but the formation of an intention, and intention is the formation of action: the spiritual becomes material. QAnoners' belief in the prophesy contributed to the movement to keep Trump in power despite his election defeat in November 2020, and ultimately their belief was a tributary of the January 2021 'insurrection'. The belief, in orienting action, prefigured the reality it foresaw. And even when that action proved to be premature, its ambition far in advance of the movement's real capacity to carry it off, QAnoners were able to continue expanding their simulacral universe. By hijacking a campaign to raise funds for the Save the Children charity and linking it to their claims of a global child trafficking network linked to Hollywood and the Democrats, they recruited well beyond their core demographic of angry, male Boomers, even attracting some survivors of childhood sexual abuse, and increasing membership of their groups by an estimated 3,000 per cent.[60]

Even if participants were merely succumbing to a kind of sunk investment fallacy by clinging to their belief, that wouldn't explain what drew them to it in the first place. The participatory nature of the machine is distinctive enough to be enlivening, where mainstream politics usually works to alienate and exclude most people. More importantly, QAnon, based on the investigation of oracular 'drops' filled with unintelligible references, vague hints and mannered rhetorical questions, made a game of

mining for apophenia: the experience of uncanny connections between seemingly unconnected things. Freud's essay on *The Uncanny* describes how harmless and familiar items, doubled or repeated, can suddenly appear chilling, forcing us 'to entertain the idea of the fateful and the inescapable'. Such apophenic resonances are a typical feature of conspiracist subcultures, working both as entertainment and critical theory. Those tracing such occulted patterns are in effect saying, correctly, that the real workings of the world are often not amenable to direct observation. To discover the patterns disclosed by statistically improbable coincidences is to penetrate the secret heart of things.[61]

A cause of conversion for anons was that by playing the game and hunting for seemingly 'impossible' patterns connecting Q's 'drops' to real events, they could mine for moments of mind-blowing apophenia. One example of this was when an anon asked Q to get Trump to use the phrase 'tip top tippy-top shape', a phrase that Trump already occasionally used. When Trump used this phrase in 2018, at a White House Easter Egg Roll while standing next to a symbolic 'white rabbit', this more than made up for the failure of Q's prophesies to be realised. Q would encourage this approach, asking his followers, 'Do you believe in coincidences?' And 'How many coincidences before mathematically impossible?' The intrigue is a lure, eliciting the desire for an explanation, much as the famous 'Macguffin' in movies keeps viewers watching.[62]

But there must also have been a desire waiting to be elicited, a readiness for the adventure. To their grief-stricken relatives, QAnon acolytes appeared to have suddenly transmogrified into irrationally hostile, paranoid strangers, but something in them must have needed this apocalyptic stand-off. Something in them must have been waiting for it. That something, I'm suggesting, is the existential void concomitant upon the countless calamities of recent decades, their assault on the fabric of trust and meaning, and their legacy in a subterranean, unspoken depression and anxiety to which disaster nationalism offers a unique and highly addictive remedy. One wants the disaster to assume the contours of a concrete and personal foe, an enemy who, unlike the abstract forces that actually rule us, can be killed in combat.

This is a lethal misprision. In reality the supposedly concrete foe is almost always an abstraction ('the Jew', 'the immigrant', 'the social justice warrior') whose dimensions are filled in by being cathected to unconscious

fantasy. The fantasy may be that I am persecuted and hunted by that in the world which I, in fact, hate and wish to destroy. I project my hostility onto the world. Or, the fantasy is that someone in the world, like the sibling at the mother's breast described by St Augustine, illicitly steals my enjoyment (which is essentially what incels accuse women of doing), whereas in fact the whole economy of resentment and revenge is the real source of my enjoyment. Or it is some other fantasy of victimhood wherein I discreetly dispose of my internal conflicts.[63] It is all too obvious how such scenarios, potentiated by real injustices and politicised by the right, become addictive, enthralling fantasies of violent retribution against folk devils. The real enemy, far from being unmasked, becomes ever more inscrutable.

This is not to neuter political hate by deliquescing it into supposedly iron laws of psychological development, nor to reduce it to its fantasmatic aspect (as though there could be any political life that was not haunted by unconscious fantasy), nor to partake of a censorious liberal moralism about the 'politics of hate'. We can no more avoid hate than we can resentment, or any other moral emotion. Hate is often both appropriate and productive for all that it is decried. As China Miéville puts it, we live in an enervating, 'hateful epoch that pathologises radical hate and encourages outrage fatigue'. The addictive cycles of outrage and burnout characteristic of modern life are both more toxically propulsive and more ultimately vitiating than a sober, considered and slow-burning hate for what ails us. How, indeed, could one think lucidly about the world, discerning in it anything but a sort of mute, orderly senselessness as a battlefield might appear from far above, without reasoned hate as a reagent?

Reason without hate is loveless and nihilistic. The problem is mindless, thoughtless, rigourless hate. The problem is hate and resentment turned toxic, in the sense of intoxicating. As the psychoanalyst Alan Bass puts it in his essay on the racist lone wolf Dylann Roof, the *ability to think* depends in essence on the ability to tolerate the tensions aroused in us by frustration and difference. To think clearly about the disasters afflicting us, is to extricate real political enmity – and it can hardly be denied that those blighted by poverty, infrastructural decay, the opioid plague and runaway wildfires have some real enemies – from primordial projections.[64]

In seeking a personal enemy with whom to duel, one finds only that part of oneself that one has walled off and projected onto an Other, or that part of one's enjoyment that is illicit and alien. One finds that intimate

whom Naomi Klein has recognised as the doppelgänger. One finds the true horror lying in one's closest neighbour, oneself: 'this heart within', as Lacan put it, 'which is that of my *jouissance*'.[65] One has embarked on a course to suicide.

3

Sex: Pornonationalism against Marxism (Making Capitalism Sexy Again)

The men experience 'communism' as a direct assault on their genitals.

– Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*[1]

> *Bolshevism thus reveals itself as the arch-enemy of civilization and the race. Bolshevism is the renegade, the traitor within the gates, who would betray the citadel, degrade the very fibre of our being, and ultimately hurl a rebarbarized, racially impoverished world into the most debased and hopeless of mongrelizations.*
>
> – Lothrop Stoddard, *The Rising Tide of Color Against White World-Supremacy*[2]

I.

Wherever disaster nationalism erupts, it produces a pornography of sexual evil: 'porno-nationalism', as Dibyesh Anand calls it. It fantasises about women who are 'disgusting vile parasites' (among the milder specimens of incel misogyny), duplicitous Muslims luring Hindu girls into their religion (the Hindu nationalist fear of 'love jihad'), and elite child sex trafficking 'across continents, through the Vatican, and underneath the cover of charities and child protective services' (as a QAnon bestseller put it). Fear arousal, as horror fans know and as psychologists have demonstrated in multiple studies, can sometimes be experienced in much the same way as sexual arousal. Even the way that extreme anxiety can trigger erections or increased vaginal blood flow often results in what is called a 'misattribution

of arousal'.[3] This raises the question of what kind of arousal the erotic catastrophes of disaster nationalism produce in its adherents.

The nation, being reproduced through sex, always recruits sexuality. In its rise during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, nationalism helped establish what Christopher Chitty called 'sexual hegemony'. The sexual norms benefiting the up-and-coming European bourgeoisie became widely accepted through being associated with the national cause. For the new rulers of Europe, George Mosse argues in his history of nationalist sexuality, these norms were restraint, respectability and strict gender segregation. This morality helped contrast bourgeois virtue with aristocratic decadence and the immorality of the lower classes. However, bourgeois respectability also became a civilizing project for society as a whole. Without it, modern life harboured sexual catastrophe: erotic intoxication overthrowing reason, masturbation promoting anti-social behaviour, men becoming women and women becoming men.[4]

Upstart nationalism thus persecuted gay cultures which had existed more convivially in medieval urban societies. Masturbation was deemed dangerously close to conspiracy. Literary works, even of venerated artists like Shakespeare, were expurgated of overt sexual references for safe public consumption. The ideal national body was strictly gendered and expunged of sensuousness. All that was threatening and dangerous in sexual pleasure was ascribed to foreigners and national enemies: immoral 'dagos', sensuous 'Orientals', Jews who allegedly behaved like women or were uncontrollable in their lust for gentile women, homosexuals who 'inverted' proper sex roles. Yet sexual hegemony was never fully stabilised, and by the early twentieth century these norms were beginning to disintegrate. Mosse describes the sexual counter-revolution emerging from World War I, crystallising in the fascist effort to reinstate bourgeois respectability and its 'strictness of form', purged of threatening ambiguities.[5]

Contemporary nationalism swaggers with male braggadocio, much in the spirit of the Italian poet and fascist Gabrielle D'Annunzio. Trump privately boasts of grabbing pussies and publicly boasts of wanting to date his daughter. Duterte publicly discourses on his huge penis. Bolsonaro sets his internet claque cackling with the announcement that he 'wouldn't rape' the former minister for human rights, Maria do Rosário, 'because she doesn't deserve it'. (Who does he think deserves rape?) The erotics of today's nationalist revival are limned by a fascination with transgressive

power. Republican strategists find that 'Walmart moms' sexually admire Trump, whom they compare to a symbol of violent power, like a lion. Even Modi's austere celibacy draws plaudits along these lines, as former Miss India America, Pria Warrick, enthuses that he is 'wild – like a lion in that beard of his'. Such literal erotic lionisation leads neo-Nazi Andrew Anglin to propose a try-hard 'Chad Nationalism' of the alt-right, fronted by 'sexy', 'dangerous', gym-hitting boys.[6] On the face of it, this looks nothing like bourgeois respectability politics.

However, the evidence is that fascism's relationship to respectability was always rather more complicated than Mosse suggests. Dagmar Herzog describes how, far from simply trying to control sexuality, the Third Reich set out consciously to produce a 'healthy', 'Aryan' version of sexual pleasure. Nazi publications incited excitement, Nazi youth clubs exhorted adolescents to fuck, contraception was abundantly available, men were encouraged to have extramarital affairs and soldiers were urged to 'carouse' (as Hitler put it) in brothels. Official Nazi sexuality was, however, sentimental, embryonically 'New Age', obsessed with nudism, nature and the healthy organism, in contrast with what the ideology saw as the grotesque, burlesque, artificial, 'Jewish' sexuality of the Weimar era.[7]

In the two-step programme of fascism, sexual liberalisation and repression went together. The ideology of German sexual health was underwritten by the laws against Jewish 'race-defilers' having relationships with 'Aryan' women, campaigns of forced sterilisation and internment, and ultimately extermination of the unwanted or threatening sexual bodies of Jews, gays and the disabled. Michel Foucault famously argued that Hitlerite sexual politics was a minor theme, subordinate to the 'oneiric exaltation of superior blood'. The Nazis, however, did not divvy up the body politic in that way. The 'carousing' of German troops typically involved their entering towns on the eve of conquest and enjoying themselves before bringing bloody race war to the same town the next day. Sexual excitement was used as a nationalising force, an incentive to discipline. The brutal logic of it even extended into concentration camps where, at Himmler's orders and with Hitler's approval, brothels were arranged for the most productive male camp labourers. 'Kraft durch Freude', the name of the Third Reich's state leisure organisation, meant 'Strength through Joy': sexual pleasure as a principle of supremacy. This is hardly fascism 'coming to the relief of the church guards', as Maria Macciocchi once put it.[8]

This brings us back to the problem of sexual theodicy: of who is sexually evil, and who deserves pleasure. Nationalists have always killed to defend themselves against their sexual fantasies. For example, in 2020, the Indian state of Uttar Pradesh passed the Unlawful Religious Conversion Ordinance. The target of the law was what its advocates claimed was a wave of 'love jihad' cases, in which sexually wicked Muslim men lured Hindu women into the camp of the enemy, feigning love in order to drive up the Muslim birth rate. This law had been won through decades of agitation by networks of grassroots vigilantes linked to the BJP, such as Bajrang Dal and Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), who claimed that Muslims were using amulets and black magic to trick Hindu girls. To stop the 'love jihad', according to activists, it was necessary to destroy the submissive, secular, anglicised upper crust linked to the Indian National Congress and the 'left'.[9]

The 'love jihad' is a popular cuck fantasy of the Hindu right, which is fascinated (as in 'fascinum', as in 'fascism') with the idea that Muslim male potency has illegitimately dominated India for 1,200 years. It draws directly from the visual idioms of fascism – *Der Stürmer*'s depictions of 'Germania' as a beautiful, blonde female in the clutches of an unattractive (yet sexually successful) Jew, or Hitler's expostulations about 'bow-legged Jewish bastards' seducing German girls. And it has been the cause of vigilante murders and implicated in communal violence, such as the riots and gang rapes in the Muzaffarnagar district of Uttar Pradesh in 2013 which resulted in 50,000 people being driven out of the district and into refugee camps. By 2020, the fantasy was not only the basis for legal repression, beginning with a youth prosecuted for befriending a Hindu girl at a party and trying to 'convert' her to Islam, but it was even endorsed by the statutory body, the National Commission for Women. This paranoid, persecutory vision of Muslim sexuality is echoed elsewhere in the idea, popular in European countries, that Muslim men are peculiarly prone to forming rape gangs or paedophile 'grooming gangs', and that this is part of a wider assault on the nation and its people. The motif of violated innocence is a consistent aspect of the nationalist cuck fantasy: consider the allegations by Bolsonaro supporters of 'gay kits' in Brazilian schools featuring baby bottles with penis-shaped teats, or Germany's 'Demo für Alle' protests against sex education reform recognising LGBT diversity, which the protesters derided as 'brainwashing' kids.[10]

In this vein, QAnon inherited a tradition of moral panic about child sex abuse. Long before QAnon's 'Save the Children' cult, or the #pizzagate conspiracy theory that precipitated it, the 'moral majority' of the United States bought into a story of Satanic ritual abuse of children that was the collective fantasy of parents, social workers, psychologists, teachers, police and coerced children. The stories it produced were easily as outrageous as anything discoverable on QAnon message boards. As Richard Beck describes the allegations in *We Believe the Children: A Moral Panic in the 1980s*, they included teachers throwing children out of a boat into a school of sharks, teachers raping the children with knives and wooden spoons and forks, and children led by adults to graveyards to dig up and mutilate bodies, or to kill baby tigers. The tales even provoked their own vigilante investigations. In their search for the tunnels and 'secret sex room' described by children at McMartin preschool, parents hired the archaeologist E. Gary Stickel to investigate. Using radar, he claimed to have discovered evidence of tunnels whose entrances and exits closely matched those described by the children.[11]

The main difference between 'Satanic ritual abuse' and the QAnon conspiracy theory is in the political function of the disavowed child pornography produced by each. The Satanic ritual abuse scandal mobilised the racial and class anxieties of white suburbia and the fear of white middle-class childhood menaced by 'delinquency', 'crack babies' and 'superpredators' as much as paedophiles. QAnon's theory of a 'deep state' paedophile ring organised by 'Luciferians and Satan-worshippers' is linked to anxieties about the growing concentration and remoteness of political power: the non-congruence of nation and state. Even this move, however, was prefigured by mainstream culture, for example in the official and sweeping UK investigations driven by false allegations of elite paedophilia involving leading politicians and celebrities, which were given much hysterical and misleading press coverage, inspiring broad buy-in from left to right before they fell apart.[12]

The pornography of sexual evil, with its invitation to restorative violence, magnifies tendencies that were already mainstream. If it packages all the anxiety, aggression, ambivalence and sex into a figure of unspeakable evil who can be killed, it only speaks in a language that everyone is familiar with. And if it externalises sexual evil, it also provides an alibi in the form of a reassuringly comforting picture of the society in

which we live. But it wouldn't be pornography if it weren't oddly compelling, including in the morbid details. It wouldn't work if it didn't give us something to be excited about and energised by, even if in the form of violent outrage.

For there to be relief, there has to be sexual excitement, involving both enticement and frustration. Pornonationalism promises to eroticise social life, not only by reviving repression but also by liberating sexual violence. It brings disaster and death into the mix. And it promises the impossible: by killing the sexually nefarious and terrorising women and LGBT people into retreat, it claims to be able to restore an era of glamorous male sexual power. Because its promise is impossible to fulfil, it keeps its subjects hankering, strung up between excitement and relief. It also incites participants to sacrifice their moral autonomy, to enjoy 'following order'. The two-step of disaster nationalism, repression and liberalisation, aims not to thwart desire but to reinstate it as desire for subjugation, a desire to 'know one's place'.

II.

Easily the most masochistic of the cuck fantasies, more nihilistic than patriotic, is the ideology of the male who is 'involuntarily celibate', the incel. The world they inhabit is *homo economicus* meets *Planet of the Apes*: a sexual market in which women are overtly described as 'commodities', and a brutal sexual caste system dominated by the silverbacks with high 'sexual market value' (a term that first appeared in pickup artist literature).

The incel's fated misery is to be born with low 'sexual market value', to be unfuckable to the women they both hate and desire. They are victims of a higher caste of 'Chads', 'Staceys' and 'Tyrones', but more deeply of evolution, which has primed women for 'hypergamy': mating with men of a higher social and sexual status. As the self-help guru Jordan Peterson puts it, 'women mate across and up dominance hierarchies, men mate across and down'. As a result, just 20 per cent of the (straight) men have 80 per cent of the (straight) sex. If disaster nationalists try to make capitalism sexy again by introducing a new combination of prohibition and license, the incels effectively reduce sex to capitalism.[13]

This bizarre story, which seems to couple neoliberal ideology with the most reductive claims of evolutionary psychology, is eerily similar to the no less speculative evolutionary tale that appears in Freud's *Totem and Taboo*. Attempting to explain the origins of guilt in modern civilization, Freud claimed that in the remote past there had to have been a primordial father who had limitless and lawless access to all women. Civilization, he claimed based on some speculative anthropology, was founded when the sons allied and killed the father, establishing a fair division of women among them. Thus, a kind of patriarchal rule of law was formed, but at the price of neurotic guilt. In the incel version of the story, feminist struggle has brought on the collapse of this order and restored the anarchic dominance of the primordial fathers. This might suggest that there should be a tension between Chad nationalists and incels which opponents could exploit – and indeed there is – but for the incels 'Chad' is an aspirational figure, while women are the evil parasites running a 'feminist gynocracy'. For the incels and their MRA brethren, feminism is nothing other than a 'sexual strategy' enabling hypergamous female mating strategies.[14]

What is arresting about this dystopian fantasy is how it binds the incels to their misery. We are all incels some of the time. None of us gets more than an approximation of the sexual pleasure we want. But for those captured by incel ideology, it is not merely a matter of the dissatisfaction that is built into sexual relations, spells of loneliness and occasional feelings of ugliness and inadequacy. The dysphoria is total. Since sex is a market governed by zero-sum competition, since women are 'commodities', since one man's satisfaction is another man's deprivation and since biology is destiny, a growing number of bamboozled young men are destined to be sexually dissatisfied. Worse than that, by naturalising zero-sum competition, incel ideology also naturalises the concomitantly sadistic culture of winners and losers, making sexual failure a more invidious experience. What political opponents see as an expression of 'privilege' and 'entitlement' is experienced as a fatal deficit in the incel's being.[15]

There is, of course, entitlement on incel forums. But the entitlement comes after the sting of inadequacy and the gut-churn of helpless rage, as a spurious ideological cure. In reality, the ideology does everything to compound the suffering. Incels thus assert that they are entitled to rape women: the women 'deserve to [be] raped' because they are 'the scum of the earth'. Incels should support 'the legalisation of rape'. Children, too,

should not be spared: support for paedophilia is a routine feature of the incel message boards. If the main superego injunction in modern society is to 'enjoy', in this case to have sex as frequently as possible, with as few limits as possible, inceldom embraces the injunction with a passion. But even their cathartic gyrations about women only compound the suicidal self-loathing, since incels still need and desire the women they despise. In a message board thread entitled 'Irish hag-whore chokes on dog cum and dies', an incel muses: 'Women would rather fuck dogs than me.'[16]

The fantasy of limitless sexual enjoyment is also a fantasy of being violated. Consider the phenomenon of Andrew Tate fandom. Tate calls himself a libertarian. He despises what he calls 'the Matrix', a *regio dissimilitudinus*, a simulacral reality produced by the 'powers that be' which emasculates virile Western males. 'I'm not a rapist,' he once explained, having asserted that he moved to Romania because it would be easier to get away with rape. 'But I like the idea of just being able to do what I want. I like being free.' To his extremely suasible male fans, this was no more than his due: 'He's "Top G" – he can rape whoever he wants.' As if to say, 'he can rape me if he wants'. Tate's fantasy 'libertarian' *Männerbund* does not attempt to stabilise the political boundary between those who may or may not defile, those who may or may not be defiled. It is a fantasy of the sovereign freedom of the one who defiles, simply because he wills it, because he can, because he is 'Top G'. Any attempt to actualise this would leave even the would-be rapist at the mercy of mere contingency, since today's 'Top G' could easily be tomorrow's victim. It is the anomic freedom fantasy of the lone wolf, the freedom of social collapse.[17] There is a fateful ambiguity between wanting to be him and wanting to be his victim.

The incel fantasia of limitless enjoyment would have few converts if its picture of reality didn't resonate with some aspects of real life. For example, the idea of 20 per cent of men 'having' 80 per cent of the sex is an exaggeration but not entirely fanciful. The General Social Survey suggests that for both men and women in the United States, it is more like 20 per cent 'having' between 50 and 60 per cent of the sex. The picture of rising sexlessness also gets some support from the same source, which finds that the number of people, especially younger people, having no sex at all has risen 28 per cent for men and 8 per cent for women, especially since 2008 – although that data is contested by other sources such as the National Health

and Nutrition Examination Survey and the National Survey of Family Growth.[18]

What is missing in this story, however, is that celibacy among young adults is increasingly *voluntary*. What is collapsing is not gratification but desire. Not only is sexual activity falling, but so is interest in sex and along with it the whole business of romance and dating. Erectile dysfunction is dramatically on the rise, suggesting a blockage that has nothing to do with the availability of sexual partners. The difficulties and disappointments that always come with sexual relationships appear to be overwhelming the ability to desire. Something about late capitalist civilization and its diminished sociality is just not very sexy: which, for Freud, would have meant that it is not worth living in.[19]

It might, then, be a mistake to take incels at their word when they claim their celibacy is wholly involuntary. On the one hand, their vision of erotic rivalry would be a means for them to arouse themselves, to restore their flagging desire. But it is also difficult not to see, in incel misogyny and the bleakly persecutory vision of sex accompanying it, a form of erotophobia. And just as a 'cannot' is often a smokescreen for a 'will not', their claim to be unfairly deprived by women may be a convenient way of externalising their own refusal. This, if true, would describe an unbearable conflict, of a sort that could only spiral, and at the end of which lies the path chosen by George Sodini, Elliot Rodger, Nikolas Cruz, Alek Minassian, Scott Beierle, Jake Davidson and Armando Hernandez Jr., among many others.

III.

Sex is a geopolitical issue, and the cause of the West's decline, according to disaster nationalism. Much as Pat Robertson blamed abortion, feminists and gays for the attacks on the World Trade Centre, so today's far right claims that the US defeat in Afghanistan is a condign punishment for having embraced 'globohomo': the 'Globalist-Homosexual Agenda'.[20]

As US troops withdrew from Afghanistan in August 2021, *Fox News* host Tucker Carlson took it upon himself to explain why the Taliban had won. 'The people of Afghanistan', he speculated to viewers, 'don't actually want gender studies symposia … They don't hate their masculinity. They don't think it's toxic. They like the patriarchy.' What he called the

‘neoliberal programme’ of equal rights was ‘grotesque’, ‘contrary to human nature’ and answered ‘none of our deepest human desires’. He added, almost wistfully: ‘So now they’re getting it all back.’[21]

On the alt-right forum Gab, users agreed that the United States lost its war in Central Asia because it was no longer the same country that had invaded in 2001 – a ‘Christian nation’ that outlawed gay marriage, considered trans people ‘mentally ill’ and banned gays from the military. Memes by Taliban supporters around the world depicted Islam as a defender of the patriarchal family against gay rights, feminism and other ‘woke’ ideologies. A post on the Telegram service run by supporters of the neofascist group Proud Boys praised the Taliban for taking ‘their nation back from globohomo’: a supposed leftist conspiracy to destroy white men and, as lone wolf murderer Brenton Tarrant put it in his 2019 ‘manifesto’, ‘make everyone a weak, mongrelized, degenerated, passive-aggressive tranny cuck worshipping the [Jew]’.[22]

The ‘symbolic glue’ holding the disparate parts of the new far right together, says gender studies scholar Andrea Pető, is the struggle against ‘gender ideology’. This is another alleged Marxist-inspired attack on traditional sex roles, inspiring opposition from the Catholic right in Poland to evangelicals in Brazil and uniting traditional militarists, the religious right, the alt-right and neofascists. The ‘deconstruction of the European male’, writes Swedish neofascist Daniel Friberg, is the sharp edge of the ‘Left’s project of destruction’. He excoriates ‘the ridiculous pseudoscience of “gender studies”’ as the latest weapon in this offensive. Following a similar logic, a series of governments, in Hungary, Romania and Brazil, have effectively banned gender studies. The French ‘New Right’ propagandist Guillaume Faye agrees that European societies have been lured by leftist propaganda into ‘sexual confusion’ by removing supposedly traditional prohibitions on ‘homophilia’, ‘inter-ethnic and inter-racial unions’, and ‘legal homosexual unions’: acts tantamount to ‘ethno-masochism’. He blames this for the decline in the European family and, concomitantly, the falling birth rate.[23]

Where ‘gender ideology’ is not identified as a Marxist attack on men, that is only because it is worse than Marxism: ‘even more destructive to man’ than communism, as Polish president Andrzej Duda put it, or even ‘worse than communism and Nazism put together’ according to Polish bishop Tadeusz Pieronek. The war on ‘gender ideology’ has been so

successful as a rightist mobilising tool that it was even used by Colombian rightists to block a peace deal between the government and the guerrilla FARC group, because the deal referred to LGBT rights. Whatever the issue, the fear and loathing of deviant sexuality can be relied on to raise opposition to a boiling point.[24]

Is this, then, the old story of fascism wanting to restore traditional sex roles and put women and LGBT people in their place? Up to a point. 'Women *want* to be conquered,' the alt-right activist Markus Willinger writes. 'Men *want* to win a woman who is worth the effort': a 'beautiful princess', not a 'scowling feminist or a jutting manjaw'. The 'tradwife' fetish, celebrating submissive, rustic femininity, instantiates this ideal. However, there are problems with this picture. The tradwife, ensconced in images of post-war family success, is as much an expression of white melancholia as of patriarchal desire. Moreover, as the political scientist Robyn Marasco argues, contemporary fascism offers women access to exactly the sort of 'transgressive … destructive impulses and antisocial forces' that the twentieth-century Austrian psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich argued were typical of fascism. Women have long been important organisers in far-right movements. But whereas traditional conservative antifeminism offered women the security of patriarchal control, today's fascism offers women celebrity, prestige and even the chance to become 'martyrs', a term the alt-right has applied to Air Force officer Ashli Babbitt, who was shot by a plainclothes police officer as she tried to storm the US Capitol building in January 2021.[25]

Neofascism also offers some gay men a similar depth-charge of transgressive violence. For example, the fascist writer Jack Donovan celebrates a version of what the early twentieth-century radical conservative Hans Blüher called the '*Männerbünde*'. Rejecting a gay identity rooted in a civilization too 'complex, cosmopolitan, individualistic' and disunited to sustain real manliness, Donovan enjoins a tribal, homosocial bonding he calls 'androphilia'. 'The repudiation of violent masculinity', he insists, 'is the murder of male identity.'[26]

The core metaphysical obsession guiding this rightist ferment in the West, the sociologist Chetan Bhatt argues, is a fear of 'white extinction' whose resolution is ultimately found in 'cleansing apocalyptic violence'. It is this preoccupation alone which can yoke together a heterogenous coalition of rightists, secular and religious, traditionalist and modernist, alt-

right and neofascist. The obsession with demographics, which took off as an Islamophobic angle during the 'war on terror' and was endorsed by such bellicose liberals as Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens, has now become the rallying cry of fascist killers. Feminisation, low birth rates and Muslim immigration were the stuff of an ongoing 'genocide' against white males orchestrated by cultural Marxists, Anders Behring Breivik argued. 'It's the birth rates,' the Christchurch murderer's 'manifesto' insisted. 'It's the birth rates. It's the birth rates.'[27]

The spectre of Marxism haunts the contemporary far right even, especially, in its sexual preoccupations. And if 'white extinction' is threatened by liberal sexual mores entailed as part of a Marxist assault on Western civilization, then the struggle is not simply to bring sexuality under control. It is, it must be, to annihilate communism once again.

IV.

Astonishingly, given its relative absence as an organised force in the world, communism is still the great Satan of nationalist politics, behind every witch and demon threatening the nation-state: 'the monster composed of all the monsters', as Joseph de Maistre said of the revolutionary mass.[28] Wherever disaster nationalism has gained ground, it has unfailingly found a 'communist' enemy to berate. And the less plausible the attribution of communism, the more fervent the anti-communism.

Barack Obama, sovereign of drone strikes, was a 'socialist' according to the Tea Party movement. Joe Biden, for whom socialised healthcare is too radical, is a 'Trojan Horse for socialism' under the control of 'wild-eyed Marxists' according to Trump. Black Lives Matter is a conspiracy of 'left-wing extremists' and 'Antifa' out to destroy 'the United States system of government'. The British government has launched its own inquiry into left-wing 'extremism' in the Black Lives Matter movement. The 'squad' of progressive women of colour in Congress – Alexandra Ocasio-Cortez, Rashida Tlaib, Ayanna Presley and Ilhan Omar – are 'a buncha communists' according to Republican Senator Lindsey Graham. In a telling grammatical torsion, he added that they 'hate our own country'. Graham offered this red-baiting as an alternative to Trump's racist demand that the squad 'go back' to their 'totally broken and crime-infested' countries. 'Aim

higher,' he suggested, as though McCarthyite thuggery were the high road when overt racism was impolitic. In June 2023, Trump promised that, if re-elected, he would 'destroy the Communists' in a 'final battle' to save America.[29]

In Brazil, a potent legacy of anti-communism beginning with the Vargas dictatorship has been reanimated since 2015. That was the year in which the moderately reformist Dilma Rousseff of the Workers' Party, having been re-elected to a second term, abruptly pivoted away from her electoral platform and embarked on an unpopular programme of fiscal austerity. This alienated allies, drove her electoral support into single digits and provoked mass unrest. A significant current in the protests, however, was the middle-class right decrying both Rousseff and her predecessor, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva (Lula), as 'merely communists in disguise'. 'We do not want a communist Brazil,' they pleaded. 'SOS military.' 'Brazil does not want and will not be a new Venezuela'. 'Army, Navy and Air Force. Please save us once again of [sic] communism.' Rousseff, fatally weakened, was overthrown in a soft coup. Lula was arrested and jailed on corruption charges that later turned out to have been manipulated by judge Sérgio Moro and lead prosecutor Deltan Dallagnol to prevent him from running for president. With Bolsonaro elected in 2018, his jubilant supporters cried, 'Death to the communists!' When Brazil's Supreme Court ruled that Lula's conviction was unsound, a pro-Bolsonaro 'militia' staged an armed protest and a simulated bombing using fireworks, calling the judges 'communists'.[30]

In Eastern Europe, especially Hungary and Poland, far-right governments claim that even after 1989 communism remained insidiously in power. The judges, professors, journalists, media producers, lawyers, teachers and others responsible for reproducing society in its normal state retained their Soviet-era connections and affinities. Their Marxism had merely morphed into a more subtle and insidious form, promoting cultural liberalism, 'gender ideology', LGBT rights, and the 'Islamization' of Europe. Even such trivialities as cyclists' rights and vegetarianism were treated as evidence of communism's enduring power, and its fusion with the new bureaucracy of the European Union. It was on this basis that Viktor Orbán justified a constitutional rupture in Hungary in 2012, abolishing the Supreme Court and stuffing the Constitutional Court and Budget Council and media council with loyalists, that helped entrench Fidesz in power.[31]

Even in the UK a toytown anti-communism was unleashed against Jeremy Corbyn, parliamentary socialist and twice-elected leader of the Labour Party in 2018. According to a flurry of fake allegations, repeated by poker-faced Conservative government ministers, Corbyn was an Eastern Bloc spy. Even when those allegations became too embarrassing to maintain, Corbyn's opponents couldn't resist calling him a communist. He led, as former Conservative leader Iain Duncan Smith expostulated, a 'Marxist and rather nasty Labour Party'. His promise to deliver free broadband for the country in 2019 was, said the media, 'broadband communism'. As the British right searches for communist enemies to make its situation more interesting, it has implicated everyone from the most milquetoast purveyors of fluffy woke doxa ('cultural Marxism') to the European Union, hardnosed champion of competitive markets (the 'EUSSR').[32]

Anti-communist fury, which would at least make more intuitive sense in countries where the residues of historical communism retain some popular traction, like India or the Philippines, has in fact been most fervent in those societies where it is almost entirely absent, such as the United States, Brazil or Hungary. The Indian right prefers to denounce opponents as 'traitors' and 'anti-nationals'. In a country where there are regionally powerful communist parties, the government does often frame its persecution of dissidents as a war against 'urban Naxals' (Naxals are a Maoist tendency in the countryside). However, this war was inherited from the previously dominant Indian National Congress. In the Philippines, the proscription of the Communist Party as a 'terrorist' organisation in 2017, and the resurgence of 'red-tagging', was consistent with a wider pattern of persecuting political opponents. The real surprise is that four members of Duterte's cabinet had been appointed by the Communist Party the year before the proscription, following years of cooperation with his violent regime in Davao City, so that they set up their own gin trap and walked straight into its closing jaws.[33]

Anti-communism without communism is hallucinatory, but not entirely new. If previous waves of anti-communism at least responded to real communist uprisings and movements, they scarcely ever engaged with communism as it really existed. Klaus Theweleit's study of the German Freikorps, who massacred leftists in the aftermath of World War I, found that the Freikorps used 'communism' as a byword for revolutionary women

(the ‘hysterical’ social justice warriors of their day), who represented the threat of castration and lawlessness. Among French antiparliamentary rightists in the 1920s and 1930s, secularism, female suffrage and reconciliation with Germany were all tantamount to ‘communism’. For the antisemitic scribe of Brazilian Integralism, Gustavo Barroso, every manifestation of human desegregation was equivalent to communism – which was itself an expression of the Jewish spirit. Moreover, fabricated communist plots were found everywhere. The Nazis took power on the strength of preventing a fictional communist coup. According to the fascist mobs who attempted to storm France’s parliament on 6 February 1934, the weak, fiscally orthodox, centre-left government of Édouard Daladier threatened a socialist coup. General Getúlio Vargas’s coup establishing the Estado Novo dictatorship in Brazil was justified by an Integralist Party forgery, ‘the Cohen Plan’, which claimed to be a detailed communist plan for insurrection.[34]

Communism was everywhere, and everywhere it was a sexual threat. The Freikorps fretted over promiscuous ‘Red women’, ‘proletarian whores’ with guns concealed under their skirts. The papal nuncio in Munich during a short-lived, post-war revolutionary government wrote to the Vatican in 1919 that the revolution was in reality sexual debauchery under the auspices of its Jewish revolutionary leader Max Levien. Brazilian fascists claimed that communists, during a brief uprising in Natal, had ‘violated defenceless virgins’ by destroying the ‘fear of God’: ‘Who can resist the strong temptation’ when the ‘field is entirely free to them’? The Cohen Plan, foreseeing communist insurrection, asserted that the excitement of the masses in rebellion would have a ‘distinctly sexual meaning’. Argentinian fascism portrayed communism through the figure of the sexually degenerate yet potent body of ‘the Jew’. During the Cold War, communism was thought indistinguishable from subversive sexuality. ‘If you want to be against McCarthy, boys,’ said Senator Joseph McCarthy, ‘you’ve got to be either a Communist or a cocksucker.’ ‘You can’t hardly separate homosexuals from subversives,’ said Senator Kenneth Wherry. During the Indonesian anti-communist massacres in 1965, which killed half a million people and placed General Suharto in power, Suharto’s propaganda electrified the public with tales of communist perversion. He warned, Vincent Bevins writes, of ‘the inversion of gender roles, the literal assault

on strong men's reproductive organs carried out by demonic, sexually depraved communist women'.[35]

In the rightist imagination, communism was particularly invidious because it hit the nation where it hurt, right where the nation was reproduced, biologically, socially and morally: in its sexual life. Such sabotage could only express immense, alien evil, a racial conspiracy against the nation: 'Judeo-Bolshevism', 'cultural Marxism', 'Antifa', 'the cabal'. It was, moreover, amorphous, formless, an occulted, diabolical power reaching its tentacles into everything. It used 'fronts', 'cryptocommunists' and 'organisation without form' as Admiral Sudomo of the Indonesian dictatorship claimed in 1973, eight years after the regime had won its war with communism. Like witchcraft, communism's power was purely negative. It possessed no creative energy, only the ability to destroy and debase 'the very fibre of our being': a 'proletarianization of the world' as race theorist Lothrop Stoddard had it. It represented the end of days, so that any amount of violence might be justified in crushing it.[36]

The image of communism as racial conspiracy had adherents well beyond fascism. As Paul Hanebrink's authoritative history of anti-communism details, the chief Russia correspondent of the *Times* blamed the Russian Revolution on the 'seething mass of Jewish pauperdom'. Winston Churchill blamed communism on the 'International Jew' who lacked national loyalties. During the first wave of anti-communist invigilation of Americans, between 1917 and 1919, Secretary of State Robert Lansing opined that the Russian Revolution proved the truth of the notorious antisemitic conspiracy theory, *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*. The Lusk Committee, investigating radicalism in New York State, argued that socialism was alien to Anglo-Saxon and Latin races, and was of German Jewish extraction. The Sedition Act of 1918 was used pointedly against 'aliens', while J. Edgar Hoover used his position in the Bureau of Investigation to raise alarm over black communism. Nativist organisations like the Minutemen militias and the Daughters of the American Revolution waged vigilante struggle against communism on a similar basis.[37]

Cold War suppression of the civil rights movement began with the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC). Assuming control of the committee, Congressman John Rankin blamed civil rights on 'the tentacles of this great octopus, communism, which is out to destroy everything'. The 'Massive Resistance' movement against civil rights

portrayed Martin Luther King and his allies as communists. Famously, protesters against desegregation in Little Rock, Arkansas, complained that 'Race-Mixing is Communism'. The eschatological dread aroused by such claims justified public inquisition organised by State Sovereignty Commissions (records of which were often burned or otherwise destroyed), state-wide bans of civil rights organisations, trials of activists and economic and physical terror.[38]

The proximity of anti-communism and racism, the way in which race and communism merge in the far-right imagination into a single diabolical figure, should give us pause. When the Tea Party berated Obama's 'socialism', for example, it was tempting to see the red-baiting as just a decorous envelope for vulgar racism: 'little more than racist code for the longstanding white fear that black folks will steal from them, and covet everything they have'. This would be a more satisfying explanation if the racism were at all well concealed. But one could just as plausibly invert the story and say that racism makes anticommunism more palatable. In Hitler's early speeches railing against communism, for example, he found it necessary to explain to the German working class why it was not in their interests to seize control of all the wealth owned by capitalists. The workers, he claimed, had been duped by the Jews. Unable to do anything useful with the wealth they had expropriated, Hitler claimed, the workers would come to depend on a Jewish commissariat: 'Everything that the common man thought that he was winning for himself, flows back again to his seducers.' Michael Mann points out that when Nazi militants named their main enemies, 63 per cent identified communists and socialists, compared to 18 per cent who named Jews. Racism reconciled violent anti-communism with the supposed interests of 'patriotic' workers. Is the same principle not at work when today's right-wing nationalists claim to speak up for the 'white working class' while opposing almost any policy that would make their lives better?[39]

The social psychologist Joel Kovel once wrote of 'black-hole anti-communism'.[40] In the black hole, everything that is perceived as threatening or dysfunctional is compressed into a single point. All crises, all opponents, are but different tentacles of the one communist kraken. The figure of 'communism' expediently acknowledges crisis and division while representing it as something assaulting the nation, sexually and racially, from the outside. The power of anti-communist fantasy lies in its

prophylactic potential. It is because the crisis is real, even where the 'communism' isn't, that it is necessary to obliterate it. Especially in its racial iterations, anti-communism is a theory of preventive extermination.

Herbert Marcuse zoomed in on this trait when he described fascism as a 'preventive counter-revolution'. In Italy, Germany and Spain, fascism had taken power promising to thwart a communist revolution that was not taking place. What was taking place was a turbulent process of democratisation, urbanisation, class struggle and the disruption of traditional morality and gender relations. The danger lay in the 'rebellious and unthinking' masses empowered by such transformations, as General Franco put it in his statement justifying the military uprising against the Spanish Republic in July 1936. As the Nationalists' public affairs officer Captain Gonzalo de Aguilera y Munro explained, 'plague and pestilence' had once helped 'thin the Spanish masses'. Now the masses, 'no better than animals', multiplied too fast. 'You can't expect them not to become infected with the virus of Bolshevism,' he claimed. 'After all, rats and lice carry the plague.'[41]

As Aguilera's words imply, the sanguinary record of fanatical anti-communism always exceeded any conceivable strategic necessity. In the bloodiest episodes of anti-communist violence, stretching from the crushing of the Paris Commune through early twentieth-century fascism, colonial counterinsurgencies such as the British assault on Malaya, bloody dictatorships in the 'free world' such as the Indonesian military coup of 1965, and US proxy wars in Central America, it is rare to find that bodies have not been mutilated, or that children have not been killed in some humiliating fashion or that war has not descended into genocide.

Where disaster nationalism sees red, therefore, blood is likely to run in the streets. The emotional contagions of late capitalism, finding a form of expression and cure in viral anti-communism, have already spawned speculative forays into grassroots anti-communist violence by private militias, vigilantes and lone wolf killers. But, as Ellen Schrecker's historical research on the 'anticommunist network' shows, as sinister as such grassroots violence is, the state has always supplied the real teeth.[42]

It is when these grassroots forces and the state combine and mesh, supported by a relatively broad civil society base, that they become truly dangerous. That is the significance of the unexpected configuration that appeared, briefly, in the United States in the summer of 2020, of

Bolsonaro's call to 'machine-gun' Workers' Party supporters in 2022, and of the promised reckonings yet to come.

4

War Machines: Cyberwar, Lone Wolves and Mass Shooters

The ghost of the former colonial subject haunts (without their being aware of it) relations among whites who have never left Europe.

– Octave Mannoni, 'The Decolonization of Myself'[1]

Man is a wolf to man.

– Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*[2]

In investigating cyberwar, conspiracy theory is methodologically mandatory.

– Nick Dyer-Witheford and Svitlana Matviyenko, *Cyberwar and Revolution*[3]

I.

'It's not about destroying ideas,' Olavo de Carvalho, Jair Bolsonaro's top public intellectual once explained of the far right's cyberwar strategies, 'but destroying the careers and the power of people. You have to be direct, and without respect – that's very important.' Steve Bannon was no less direct. If some 'guy comes after our audience', he explained of his *Breitbart* trolls, 'we're going to leave a mark. We're not shy about it at all. We've got some lads that like to mix it up.'[4]

The methods of cyberwar being perfected by disaster nationalism deploy a strategy of revenge. In the dreamwork of nationalist fantasy, the

underground resentments of daily life have already been turned onto a series of fungible objects (traitors, anti-nationals, cultural Marxists, and so on), whom it might be fun to berate, threaten or kill. Cyberwar weaponises this, encouraging participatory sadism. This is as true of the trolling 'black ops' used by Duterte as of the 'Gabinete do Ódio' ('Office of Hate') working out of Bolsonaro's cabinet to intimidate the Supreme Court and opposition politicians, or the Israeli trolls working to intimidate journalists who criticise Netanyahu (reporters admit to softening their language, even avoiding reference to Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza, because it is better to be criticised by the left, who are 'considered traitors anyway'). The goal is to leverage rhetorical violence into real damage, sometimes death. In Brazilian far-right circles it is known as 'linchamento' (lynching). In the United States, no such centralised operation has been disclosed, but Donald Trump was after all a one-man troll farm. When, for example, he denounced the 'squad' of four progressive women of colour in Congress as 'pro-Al Qaida', claiming that Rep. Ilhan Omar had talked of 'how wonderful Al Qaida is' and suggesting that the four should all 'go back' to the 'totally broken and crime-infested places from which they came', he may as well have placed a bounty on their heads.[5]

But it isn't necessary that leaders should get their hands dirty. Consider one of Narendra Modi's most subtle tactics in dealing with opposition. Modi, as the journalist Swati Chaturvedi has documented, certainly operates a centralised, top-down troll army, as a complement to his wider offensive against journalistic expression and to control cultural output in India. These trolls, along with a 'shadowy parallel campaign' of paid racist trolls described by the *Washington Post*, impart message discipline to a wider online following.[6]

However, Modi, recognising the value of ad hoc vigilantism, uses a tactic of 'reward follows' for the most virulent citizen-trolls. Although he only follows a couple of thousand people on Twitter, hundreds of them have been identified as random citizens who happen to be die-hard supporters of Modi and the BJP, violently anti-Muslim and often systematically engaged in harassment or inciting violence against the opposition. As soon as the words 'Blessed to be followed by @narendramodi' appear in their bio line, these minor accounts with few followers experience a surge of attention and confidence. Going further, Modi invited 150 of these trolls round to tea at the prime minister's official residence. One of those in attendance, Tajinder

Singh Bagga, who had led a trolling operation against the anti-corruption lawyer Prashant Bhushan that culminated in an invasion of the lawyer's offices in which Bagga allegedly assaulted him, was later appointed spokesperson for the BJP Delhi unit. Such rewards are an emotionally intelligent, low-cost way to stimulate uncompromising loyalty among those who are already prepared to do anything to defend Modi.[7] These tactics align official with unofficial incitement, paid and volunteer trolling, in a manner that can be denied with semi-plausibility.

For example, in September 2017, a veteran journalist and critic of the BJP, Gauri Lankesh, was murdered by three armed men at her home. Lankesh had been a target of numerous defamation suits by various gangsters, politicians and business leaders trying to put her and her publication, *Gauri Lankesh Patrike*, out of business. She had received death threats from BJP and RSS cadres and was also evidently on the hit list of the BJP's national social media convenor, Amit Malviya, who had used her recent conviction for defamation against two BJP members as a warning to other journalists. For BJP trolls, she was a 'presstitute', 'naxalite', and 'Hindu hater'. One of the main methods of incitement was a widely shared video entitled 'Real Face of SECULARISM'. The original video contained an edited version of a speech by Lankesh criticising Hindu nationalism and was viewed 250,000 times before it was taken down (it has since been reposted). The video, which attracted furious comments from viewers ('hang them'), was shared by an official BJP page in the state of Karnataka where Lankesh lived. It was also downloaded and witnessed by several of the assassins, one of whom explained that his motive was to 'save my religion'.

The killing was the result of a collective process of dehumanisation, incitement and intimidation, with a loose division of labour between those official forces who identified targets and outlined the general ideological lines of attack, and those unofficial or disavowed forces who attacked with harassment and lethal violence. In the immediate aftermath of the killing, a similarly loose division of labour obtained between semi-official deflection and unofficial celebration. Arnab Goswami, an attack dog for Modi at Republic TV where he is the majority owner and lead anchor, speculated that Naxals were to blame for the killing. But among Modi's favoured trolls, the glee was undisguised: 'A bitch died a dog's death,' as one of them wrote.[8] From Narendra Modi, however, not one word.

Whereas Modi's strategy subtly delegates the most extreme cruelty while he maintains a tactful silence, Rodrigo Duterte took power on an overt programme of popular brutalisation. He bragged about multiple murders he had allegedly committed. He said to criminals, 'If I have to kill you, I'll kill you. Personally.' He warned that journalists were 'not exempted from assassination if you're a son of a bitch'. In so doing, he not only tended his personal 'Duterte Harry' brand, but he liberated, honoured and rewarded the aggressive impulses of his audience, dignifying them as anti-establishment.[9]

As in meatspace, so in cyberwar. Shortly after Duterte's victory in the 2016 Philippines general election, academics at the University of Oxford published a study showing that Duterte's campaign had spent $200,000 on troll farm operations by media CEO Nic Gabunada. The for-hire trolling market is large, and global, but the Philippines has always had a particularly advanced 'disinformation architecture'. This ensured that Duterte could continue to use a fully privatised troll strategy after taking power. His money bought him a total of five hundred individual trolls working from a call centre, each running a dozen accounts, all micro-managed and centrally organised according to a hierarchy of function. At the bottom were those posting scripted comments under news articles. At the top were those who seeded online communities or orchestrated smear and intimidation campaigns against rivals.[10]

According to Peter Pomerantsev, the trolls did not simply start blasting propaganda. Rather, they worked to establish a rhythm. Those who seeded Facebook groups based in local communities, for example, would start by posting regular material in the local dialect without an obvious political slant. They built up memberships approaching 100,000 each. As the election neared, because Duterte's issue was crime, they began posting one news story about violent crime per day. And because Duterte's specific appeal was the drugs war, they would usually leave a comment blaming drug dealers. Then, as the election drew closer, the rate of posting would increase to two news stories per day. Then three. Then more. They generated a rhythm of seemingly spontaneous, locally rooted, apolitical 'concern'.[11]

A few thousand well-orchestrated accounts with professionally built audiences was sufficient to game the algorithms by forcing hashtags and 'trending topics' up the agenda, changing what the social industry platforms

showed to users and forcing media coverage. Exploiting the homophilous logic of the social industry platforms, it also enabled audience discovery. Paid trolls frequently become 'trusted' accounts: like 'Q', the more anonymous they are, the more easily they become vessels for the positive projections of their audiences. Duterte's small army of paid trolls gathered around itself an ecology of agitation that harnessed the free labour of hundreds of thousands of enthusiasts. This was enough to drive his ratings up several points, spawning new cycles of mass media interest, further enhancing his online reputation. A similar tactic would later be used in the 2019 midterms, in which 'Flat Earth' Facebook was suddenly awash with pages and influencers likely to be run by paid trolls, who beat out a relentless rhythm of pro-Duterte propaganda.[12]

As with other culture war presidents, Duterte's mode of rule depended on permanent algorithmic campaigning. He could not afford to bore his audience. Rather, he offered continuous parasocial engagement, mobilisation and participatory sadism. In his 'war on drugs', for example, he urged unemployed members of the public to kill addicts. Likewise, when he targeted so-called 'presstitutes', or denounced a critical journalist as a 'traitor' and not a 'true Filipino', Gabunada's troll army was there to feed volunteer combatants the lines for a campaign of character assassination, harassment, and rape and death threats. Extravagant cruelty was synergised across the whole campaign, and it continued while Duterte was in office. It was vital that he continue to riff on existing patterns of demonology, find new culture wars to fight and offer his followers treacherous new targets to assault.[13]

To take one prominent example, within a year of his taking office, Duterte's cyberwar strategy was unleashed on Maria Ressa, publisher of the critical magazine *Rappler*. Under the #ArrestMariaRessa hashtag, the trolls called Ressa a threat to national security, an ISIS propagandist, a Nazi and a purveyor of fake news who took money and editorial direction from foreigners. 'I want Maria Ressa to be raped repeatedly to death,' a typical comment said. 'I would be so happy if that happens when martial law is declared, it would bring joy to my heart.' Duterte's supporters, who might otherwise not feel sufficiently informed or empowered to rebut criticisms of him, did not need a rebuttal: they needed to be on the offensive. They generated a rhythm of collective pleasure in shaming and bullying, providing a sense of potency thinly veiled as justified outrage, and utterly

disorienting the journalists under fire. This rhythm fed into a series of vexatious prosecutions pursued by the government, culminating in Ressa's recent conviction for 'cyberlibel'. For others, it meant death: twenty-two journalists were among those murdered by vigilantes during Duterte's reign, and the killings continue under his successor, Bongbong Marcos.[14]

II.

In the salad days of the internet, the French poststructuralist Félix Guattari looked forward to a 'post-media' age. The 'element of suggestion, even hypnotism' present in old media would vanish.[15]

If anything, the element of suggestion has been radicalised. The parasocial relations with online celebrities, the loyalties cultivated towards information sources that ratify unconscious needs, the willingness to be provoked into hyperactive posting and online vigilantism by expert button-pushers and the propensity to inflate disagreement into threat all show how suggestible we really are. The tactics of nationalist cyberwar, after all, leverage universal tendencies of behaviour on the social industry's platforms. One need not be specifically moronic to have one's attention gamed, partake in online demonology or fall for a fabricated story. Anyone can be conscripted, rhythmically organised and put to work for people who are never seen or heard about until they've got what they wanted and moved on. To be contra-suggestible in this context, we would have to understand just how gullible and subordinated we are.

'The first thing that power imposes', wrote Roland Barthes, 'is a rhythm.' This is exactly how the social industry works. While seemingly allowing us to pursue our own schedules and priorities, Dominic Pettman explains, it has already anticipated 'the different speeds and circuits' available to us in the authorised networks we move in. We are, writes Matthew Flisfeder, slaves to the 'algo-rhythm'. Anyone wishing to conscript a large digital army must first understand how to use these rhythms against the users.[16]

Disaster nationalist leaders have done this better than anyone else. They understand that incitement works best when fused with entertainment and celebrity, as in the online cottage industries of far-right disinfotainment. The clichéd image of fascist propaganda is of an incessant stream of

brainwashing messages delivered with military music, parade-stomping and speeches by a charismatic madman. That was never accurate. The fascist culture industry was as deliberately antipolitical as it was anti-intellectual. Joseph Goebbels, as Reich propaganda minister, exhorted radio broadcasters: 'Don't be boring!' Under his stewardship, both radio and cinema reduced their political output, with much more popular music, comedy and costume drama. The Nazis exploited the conservative, conformist elements already available as entertainment. The main political content broadcast on the cheap radios they called People's Receivers was Hitler's speeches, but even this was organised around the parasocial, celebrity relationship between masses and Führer. Culture war, just like cyberwar, is most effective when it does politics by other means.[17]

If the social industry tends to promote far-right disinfotainment, as Zeynep Tufecki and others have documented, it could be argued that it is only picking up on, magnifying and reflecting back the signals accumulated by user watch-times and click-throughs.[18] The industry is merely giving the users what they didn't even know they wanted. There must be some truth in this. Yet of course the system is also designed to thrive on volatile culture wars, in which user identities are formed through surges of attention, gyrations of outrage and the latest berated enemy. Through these online shitstorms, communities are formed along tribal lines, and cultural differences ossify, becoming more like borders than weather fronts. Such outrages also form the occasion for recruiting audiences to far-right outrage porn. It was through such *Sturm und Drang*, #gamergate and #birthergate for example, that some of the constituents of the modern alt-right congealed in the first place.

The far-right strategy of 'flooding the zone with shit', as Steve Bannon put it, is supposedly intended to disorient and baffle the media. Whitney Phillips calls this 'smokescreen trolling' because it rivets attention anywhere but on the real assault on democratic freedoms. But it is more than that. In engineering identity-forming convulsions, it never fails to name the enemy, and it keeps the trollroots excited and mobilised.[19] The friend/enemy distinction is the essence of the strategy of revenge. Its programmatic expression is the networked witch hunt, combining the efforts of politicians, journalists, paid trolls and volunteer combatants in a loose division of labour. All who are included in the nation can partake:

reactionaries have always been attuned to the popular pleasures of joining in.

It is tempting to compare this sort of offensive to the nomadic 'war machine' of which Deleuze and Guattari wrote. They referred to the culture of ancient nomad warriors who, they argued, fought wars in a decentralised fashion prior to war's appropriation by the state. But they also intended the term to describe how contemporary revolutionaries might outflank the state. This image informed a popular, cyberutopian view of online activism in its early days: the internet, accelerating the pace of commodification, would dissolve political authority into a 'nomoid zone of mad clusters', 'unintelligible webs of swarmachinery'. Far from it, in fact: as Jen Schradie has documented, the winners of cyberwar tend to be traditionally well-funded, centralised, top-down organisations.[20]

However, Nick Dyer-Witheford and Svitlana Matviyenko point out, digital war has already been appropriated by the state: in fact, it was never *not* a state strategy. From the United States to Russia, states have been running troll farms, sock puppet accounts and other cyberwar tactics, recruiting citizen-soldiers in their millions, sometimes without their being aware of it, in a new *levée en masse*. This top-down aspect is essential to cyberwar: the phenomenon of 'stochastic terrorism', where official incitements probabilistically condition the likelihood of a terrorist assault within a given population, would make no sense without it. Popular involvement in nationalist cyberwar, including its explosions into meatspace violence, more closely resembles the 'self-energising' processes of voluntary spying and denunciation that historian Alf Lüdtke describes in the daily life of fascist regimes rather than anything 'nomadic'. The networked witch hunt, however decentralised, is already part of, and takes its cue from, the state.[21]

And spitting from the calefactory cauldron of culture war, like sparks from a furnace, are seemingly random acts of senseless violence in which trolling fascist 'anons' from gamer message boards and alt-tech forums train their memed, ironised cruelty on flesh and blood.

III.

The strategy of revenge bleeds into online communities of the lone wolfish, spawning a new contagion. Lone wolf killers are self-consciously memetic. They study and emulate one another just as mass shooters do. They make every effort, from manifesto to livestream, to court emulation. The lone wolf is an entrepreneurial barbarian, a one-man-pogromist, who wants to be copied.

The number of lone wolf attacks has been increasing in recent years, but so has the rate of increase. According to the database kept by Mark Hamm and Ramon Spaaij, using a very narrow definition of what constitutes a lone wolf attack, the number of such assaults in United States in the 1980s was 31; in the 1990s, it was 27; in the 2000s, it was 54; by 2016, as Trump took office, it was already 115 for the 2010s. Between the 1970s and the 2000s, the number increased 143 per cent. If the 2010s had stopped in 2016, the rate of increase between two decades would have been 213 per cent. In fact, the acceleration continued, with 300 to 350 cases of 'crimes inspired by extremist ideology' a year after 2016, and 47 to 78 'extremist-related murders' per year between 2015 and 2019. The killings in the 2010s were also the bloodiest thus far, with a far higher number of 'mass killing incidents' than in any preceding decade.[22]

Part of what is contagious about the lone wolf meme may be the death wish that it formulates. Lone wolf killers tend to survive their deeds, but in their fantasies they usually die. 'Kill me,' the incel murderer Alek Minassian shouted at armed police after his vehicular assault on pedestrians in Toronto. 'I have a gun in my pocket. Shoot me in the head.' 'I've done my job,' Darren Osborne told police after ploughing a van into a crowd at Finsbury Park Mosque, 'you can kill me now.' Anders Behring Breivik, before being apprehended by police for his massacres in Oslo and Utøya, was mulling over whether to shoot himself in the head. Dylann Roof, before embarking on his massacre at a black church in Charleston, South Carolina, left suicide notes for his parents. Alexandre Bissonnette, the Quebec mosque killer, had spent months planning his suicide and researching mass shootings and suicide attacks. 'Kill me,' Florida mass shooter Nikolas Cruz begged police. 'Just fucking kill me.' Payton Gendron, the neo-Nazi shooter, had fantasised, in the year before his action in Buffalo, about committing a 'murder-suicide'. His manifesto anticipated his death and, following his murders, police talked him down as he pointed his rifle at his neck. After committing a racist massacre in Jacksonville, Ryan Palmeter

shot himself. Umberto Eco wrote of the 'Ur-Fascist hero' who craves 'heroic death'. The lone wolf fascist, almost to a man, wants to be done with life: his 'manifesto' is a suicide note. As Pankaj Mishra put it, the religion of whiteness has become a suicide cult.[23]

The original lone wolf manifesto, inspiring a plague of imitations, was Breivik's *2083*: a pastiche of gamer talk, Marvel-style fantasy, and diatribes cut-and-pasted from various right-wing Anglo-American websites. In its end times scenario, 'patriots' would deploy anthrax, deadly pathogens, weapons of mass destruction, even atomic weapons against 'cultural Marxists'. There would be 'organised executions of multiculturalist traitors'. Breivik, declaring governments already under the control of 'cultural Marxists', hoped that such bloody crescendos would be sparked by 'military shock attacks' like his own. He did not expect to live to see this continent-wide race war, cresting towards nuclear annihilation. His chances of death during his planned attack were, he estimated, above 80 per cent. His chances of surviving to complete his 'three primary objectives AND the bonus mission' were 'less than 5%'. Nonetheless, he encouraged potential followers: 'This is the big day you have been looking forward to for so long … today you will become immortal.'[24]

Yet having a death wish is not quite the same thing as being suicidal. Most 'lone wolf' killers survive their deed. An FBI study of 160 mass killings in the United States between 2000 and 2014 found that 64 assailants had ended their attacks by killing themselves. ('Mass killings' is a much broader classification than 'lone wolf killings', but as we'll see the distinction between these categories is porous.) Of those who do kill themselves, the putative existence of a death wish wouldn't explain why they chose *this* sort of exit. Breivik's answer was: to spread the word. As he suggested, his murders were the 'marketing plan' for his manifesto. He wasn't just out to terrorise Norwegian social democracy, but to spark a plague of fascist manifestos. And this was to happen, not through vertical organisation, but through peer-to-peer, horizontal exchange. It worked. The neo-Nazi who murdered Labour MP Jo Cox in 2016 was an enthralled imitator and so, too, was the Christchurch murderer who sought to turn himself into a meme presaging global race war by livestreaming his massacre of fifty Muslims. The latter's manifesto was a self-consciously memetic document, packed with Easter eggs for lulz-hungry admirers among gaming communities on 8chan. He sought 'heroic' death in

murderous ‘service to some grand crusade’. Within weeks, yet another 8chan-embedded fascist killer had struck, this time at a synagogue in San Diego, leaving yet another meme-packed manifesto. Months later, a gunman walked into a Walmart in El Paso and began shooting. Before he did, he posted a manifesto to 8chan, with a message saying, ‘I’m probably going to die today’.[25]

The manifestos were almost identical in their justifications, breezily matter of fact in setting out their methods for imitators and garishly mawkish in their auto-lionising. What mattered more than their content, however, was that they deliberately played to an online community of the lone wolfish. In the message boards where these communities thrived, anons assiduously shared these manifestos in the hope of encouraging imitation. They spoke admiringly of the Christchurch killer and of their desire to ‘beat his high score’. One anon described his livestreamed massacre as ‘possibly the most powerful meme we have ever had: the shooting video’. When lone wolf shooters posted just before embarking on their rampages, anons begged them to ‘get the high score’.[26]

The cold, sociopathic detachment of the anons reminds us that we are in the realm of the hyperreal, where the HUD-wearing gamer interacts with a digitally modelled simulacrum. And the lone wolf killers are acutely aware of the fact that, as well as creating carnage, they are creating an image of carnage. During his homophobic massacre at the Pulse nightclub in Orlando, Omar Mateen couldn’t resist checking his phone, scrolling his feeds to see if he could find references to what was happening. This *mise en abyme*, Narcissus-in-negative, eerily resembles a moment during the Gulf War (1991) in which CNN switched to reporters ‘live’ in the Gulf to find out what was happening, only to find that they were watching CNN to find out what was happening. As though what was ‘happening’ were the digital image. As though Mateen’s atrocities were only really verified once they became digital images.[27]

IV.

What sort of social contagion is this? The original ‘brown plague’, as Dylan Riley’s history of European fascism demonstrates, spread through a vibrant culture of veterans’ associations, military clubs, rightist parties and

paramilitaries in the 1920s and 1930s. From Germany's Stahlhelm to France's Union nationale des combattants, veterans organisations were the backbone of a violent social movement opposed to republicanism, democracy and socialism. They had close links to conservative political parties and they were enmeshed in a thick civic network of churches and voluntary organisations.[28] The lone wolf plague took off in a very different environment.

The beginnings of the lone wolf concept can be traced to the activities of far-right Vietnam veterans who had returned to a fundamentally altered United States. For most of its history, white supremacy was an openly respectable policy in the United States. The Ku Klux Klan had, at its peak in the 1920s, been a vigilante white supremacist movement with mainstream support, close to local police departments, often working as an arm of state power. The Klan scene that emerged after the civil rights movement and the Vietnam War was changed. The alliances that white supremacists had previously enjoyed with politicians, police and the judiciary were weakened. Even if they could still rely on the amity of local police, the federal government was now their enemy.[29]

Yet, as Kathleen Belew's history of the 'white power' movement shows, what the civil rights movement had undone, Vietnam could help rebuild. Veterans had combat experience killing communists, and many of them returned to the United States intending to put it to work. For example, in the Greensboro Massacre of 1979, members of the Ku Klux Klan and the Nazi Party killed members of the Communist Workers' Party in the streets of Greensboro, North Carolina, with the connivance of local police. Yet, later, increasingly bereft of officially condoned violence, a coalition of neo-Nazis, Christian Identitarians, anti-tax activists and Klan members formed an insurrectionary subculture hostile to the federal government which they believed had betrayed them.[30]

While the term 'lone wolf' was coined by the FBI with a discernible trace of romantic admiration, it was from within the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, the organisation founded by former Nazi student agitator David Duke and future Stormfront proprietor Don Black, that the idea was formulated. Louis Beam, Grand Dragon of the Texas Klan, had killed with distinction in the Vietnam War. On his return, he organised militias to attack Vietnamese migrants, and he was charged twice with bomb attacks on leftist headquarters. But he worried that any formal armed hierarchy could be too

easily infiltrated and dismantled. In the writings of an ex–CIA agent, Col. Louis Amoss, he found the concept of ‘leaderless resistance’. Amoss had come up with the idea of dispersing armed force into tiny phantom cells of ones and twos, who could act without instruction from leadership. Ironically, the Viet Minh had used the idea to defeat the vastly more powerful United States. Beam, an ardent anti-communist, foresaw a dark night of federal ‘tyranny’ over the white race comparable to communist dictatorship. He suggested that armed ‘patriots’ would have to engage in leaderless resistance, while the organised far right restricted itself to propaganda activity.[31]

This was a tactic born of political isolation and millenarian impatience. One of its most vocal advocates after Beam was neo-Nazi Tom Metzger, who launched the brand organisation White Aryan Resistance (WAR) in the same year that Beam’s article was published. Adopting Beam’s rationale, WAR self-consciously eschewed formal membership, inviting supporters to identify with its precepts and act on them. For Metzger, the ideal would be to have mass paramilitaries take on the government: ‘The SS did it in Germany … we can do it right here in the streets of America.’ The necessity of the ‘lone wolf’ arose from the fact that most whites were ‘brain dead’, a ‘herd’. From the 1990s, he was deeply impressed with the organised firepower of jihadist networks striking on US soil, and their ability to provoke escalating conflict. As with Breivik, Metzger’s hope was that the demonstrative violence of individuals would provoke an apocalyptic race war, a final struggle in which whites would be forced to take sides. Yet when the lone wolf concept did take off, it was not for any of the reasons that Beam or Metzger might have imagined.[32]

The modern lone wolf phenomenon flared up in an impoverished civic environment, amid the breakdown of social bonds, rising income inequality, collapsing social trust and the transitional crisis of inherited social norms. The only sacred moral and political rules in the era of lone wolf ascent were universal competition and generalised paranoia. Lone wolf massacres are, in the terms of sociologist Émile Durkheim, crimes of ‘anomie’ par excellence, born of the nihilism following from severe disruptions to the social fabric.[33] Nor did the contagion primarily spread through the marginal organisations or traditional online outlets of the far right, such as Don Black’s *Stormfront*, any more than the Capitol riot gathered its forces through militias. Lone wolf manifestos and memes were the currency of

gamer forums, Reddit channels and other social industry platforms with no open fascist affiliation.

The spread of the lone wolf idea defied the normal logic of social contagions. The sociologist Damon Centola usefully distinguishes between simple and complex contagions. Simple contagions have a low threshold for uptake, so they spread quickly through the most random connections. The ideal medium for their diffusion would be a 'small world' network with many 'weak ties', rather like the internet, or global markets. A world of tightly knit communities, on the other hand, would be actively disadvantageous. Every community would be a network redundancy acting as a drag on diffusion. A complex contagion behaves differently. The thresholds for uptake are higher because anyone considering an idea that is risky, or whose benefits are uncertain, needs a lot of persuasion and social validation. The result is that such a contagion spreads most efficiently through close communities with a lot of social trust.[34] This is how social movements, from the Paris Commune to civil rights, spread. The lone wolf phenomenon is undoubtedly a complex contagion. Yet it seems to behave like a simple contagion. It spreads, not through tightly knit communities, but through anti-communities of 'anons': people who don't know each other and, as their trollish subculture mandates, are often brutally sadistic to one another. The lone wolf contagion behaves, that is, like an anti-social social movement.

That gaming forums turned out to be the anti-community of choice is telling. In the context of declining social interaction, dating and sex – especially in the younger generation – online chat is more satisfactory than face-to-face interaction. A lonely person can be a 'legend' in online communities: consider Breivik, who spent the years prior to his massacre playing *Call of Duty* in his mother's house. However, gaming is not just socialising. As Alfie Bown puts it in *The Playstation Dreamworld*, games are 'devices that operate us'. The HUD interface takes us into a dreamworld that is not our own and gives us a chance to desire things that we do not desire. As the QAnon cult demonstrates, the far right has already learned how to operationalise this. The lone wolfish wing of gamer forums have found a way to gamify racist and sexist massacres, thus helping the diffusion of the meme.[35]

Yet the dreamwork of gamification is only a facilitator of diffusion. At most it sustains a group fantasy, sufficient for a few to act upon. It doesn't

explain the appeal of the fantasy, nor what is so emulable about the idea of tooling up and assaulting mosques, synagogues, black churches, abortion clinics and shopping centres, or ploughing a van into crowds of people, or rushing pedestrians with machetes. Nor is it sufficient to refer to the concept of 'stochastic terrorism'. While it probably contains some truth – lone wolfish propaganda acts, as Ernst Simmel wrote of antisemitism, like a 'psychological robot bomb' detonating before a single shot has been fired – a series of thresholds must already have been crossed for enough people to be receptive to the propaganda. It is all the more puzzling that this plague spread, much on the same pattern as mass shootings, as violent crime declined overall.[36]

A clue might lie in the fact that, as noted, so many lone wolves prepare for their murderous outrages by becoming shlock writers in the genre of political manifestos. Mark Hamm and Ramon Spaaij document a tendency for lone wolf attackers to knot together personal and political resentments, creating 'ideologies that combine personal vendettas with broader political or religious grievances'. This is exactly what one finds in the lone wolf manifesto. For example, Elliot Rodger, the original men's rights activist killer – and 'supreme gentleman' according to his online admirers – combined his personal misery and sense of being lost with violent misogyny and racism. His lengthy self-mythologising videos, autobiography and comic book-style apocalyptic crescendos weave his history of narcissistic injury, bullying, isolation, racial self-hatred, sense of class decline and feeling of being cheated of sexual pleasure and romantic comfort into a paranoid prospectus for 'quarantining' women like 'the plague they are', forcing them into 'concentration camps' and starving them to death.[37]

The manifesto productions of lone wolves express what the counterterrorism expert Florian Hartleb calls a 'personal ideology of grievances'. Or, to put it another way, a personal conspiracy theory. It blends a programme of stylised revenge with a desperate attempt at sense-making. For the *cri de coeur* of the conspiracy theory is not only that 'they're all out to get me', but also that 'nothing makes sense'. In a crisis of meaning, the conspiracy theory is not a route to personal madness but a self-cure for it. Ernst Simmel wrote of Nazi antisemitism that it represented a 'flight into mass psychosis' as an attempt to cure 'individual insanity'.

Borges described it as a ‘learned hallucination’. For what illness is this flight into hallucinatory, networked madness the cure?[38]

v.

There is a danger in pathologising ‘lone wolf’ pathology. It can be dangerously depoliticising, and it risks depriving the killers of responsibility for their actions. When Breivik underwent his first psychiatric evaluations prior to trial, for instance, his evaluators decided that his bizarre beliefs were psychotic delusions and diagnosed him with paranoid schizophrenia. This echoed a previous psychiatric evaluation of the nail bomber and former British National Party (BNP) member David Copeland prior to trial for a series of attacks on black and gay Britons in the late 1990s. While there seemed to be no doubt among professionals as to Copeland’s illness, Breivik was ultimately deemed sane and sentenced to twenty-one years in prison.[39]

The dilemma is obvious. On the one hand, the beliefs that psychiatrists are apt to treat as delusional are, in fact, perfectly ordinary among the far right. On the other hand, does this mean that fascist beliefs are functionally equivalent to delusions? Even if they are, just because a person is delusional does not mean that their actions aren’t political. In *Suspicious Minds*, Joel and Ian Gold document the cultural shaping of the delusions of psychotics, noting for example the prevalence of *Truman Show* delusions after the movie of that name. Patients might begin by perceiving that *something is wrong* in their reality. They might experience apophenia, the unsettling feeling that random events in their lives are connected. They might perceive things happening around them as being, in some obvious yet inscrutable way, ‘fixed’, ‘rigged’, ‘orchestrated’. They might form a delusion in which they are the object of a ‘vast game’ with unfathomable rules, in which they are being constantly watched and manipulated, and in which the people in their lives are actors. If there can be a ‘Truman syndrome’, might there not also be an ‘Infowars syndrome’, or a ‘QAnon syndrome’, in which psychotic experience is politicised?[40]

Yet there is no evidence that, in general, lone wolf fascism is a product of psychotic delusion. The effort by political Freudians like Simmel to interpret fascism as ‘mass psychosis’ depends on the disproven claims of

'crowd psychologists' like Gustave Le Bon that masses regress, become irrational and lose individual agency in a crowd. It is also difficult to see how the categories of mental illness designed for the individual clinic can be applied to a 'mass' or 'group' without some mediating steps. And at the individual level, just because a belief *resembles* a delusion doesn't mean it has the *function* of a delusion for the individual who holds it. In fact, a belief and a delusion are two quite opposed phenomena: delusions are not entertained as beliefs at all, but as absolute certainties. While mental illness is one predictor of lone wolf activity, a far bigger predictor is military experience. According to the American lone wolf database created by Hamm and Spaaij, only 40 per cent of lone wolf killers suffer from mental illness. Those that do, suffer variously from anxiety, depression, schizophrenia and, among soldiers, post-traumatic stress disorder. A study of European 'lone actors' found that about 35 per cent suffered some kind of mental health disorder, compared to 27 per cent of the general population.[41]

The aetiology of 'lone wolf' murder will not resolve into 'mass' psychology or disclose a particular personality 'type'. There is something fatally flawed about any effort to resolve political struggles into the unconscious struggles of the nursery. Such analyses produce, as Daniel Pick recounts of wartime psychoanalysts in *The Pursuit of the Nazi Mind*, a simplified and spuriously universal picture of unconscious minds governed by eternal categories like the Oedipus complex. A similar criticism applies to efforts by Theodor Adorno and his colleagues to portray the fascist-in-waiting in the outlines of an 'authoritarian personality'. The empirical evidence for such a personality, and its relation to actual fascist recruitment, is weak. But neither can we bypass the psychological domain, for that is where politically generated suffering is in turn politicised and converted into violent action. We need an approach that neither distils the phenomenon into spuriously universal psychopathological categories nor glosses over it in broad-brush political analysis. Frantz Fanon's suggestive category of 'socio-diagnostics' may be useful here. It can allow us to see how the historical situation may be, as the psychoanalyst Derek Hook puts it, 'wired through' the psychosexual lives of individuals.[42]

Thomas Mair, for example, the lone wolf of 'Britain First', who murdered the Labour MP Jo Cox the week before the UK voted in a referendum to leave the European Union, was a neo-Nazi. He was obsessed

with questions of race war, national sovereignty and postempire decline. But if his beliefs were extreme, they responded to the same questions that had preoccupied the British right for decades: from Enoch Powell's warning that 'the black man will have the whip hand over the white man' to historian David Starkey's fear, expressed in the moral panic amid England's 2011 youth riots, of 'the whites becoming black'.[43]

This protest against racial confusion and melding was the *cri de coeur* of twentieth-century segregationists, with which Mair was also obsessed. Geoffrey Cronjé, the theorist of South African apartheid, fixated on ideas of contamination and purity, mixing and 'miscegenation'. He worried that, without apartheid, low-income white and black people would become too similar in their social conditions. They would mix and come to feel alike. He was plagued by the idea of a 'mishmash' or 'mengelmoes' of races, an unintelligible pulpy mass: the whites would become black, and society would turn to shit.[44]

This dread, as the South African writer J. M. Coetzee observed in his essay on Cronjé, resembles Freud's conception of obsessional neurosis. The obsessive, terrified of uncleanliness, contamination and death, develops elaborate rituals and prohibitions to remain clean. Yet the image of death he has in mind is in fact the image of his own unacknowledged desire. His prohibitions pulse with longing for the forbidden. His rituals, Coetzee suggests, are a 'counterattack upon desire'. This obsession with cleanliness and fear of contamination appears constantly in racist ideology. Why should this colonial complex, originating from the segregation imposed by South Africa's British rulers at the end of the nineteenth century, appear in the mental life of twenty-first century Britain? It is as if 'the ghost of the former colonial subject', as Octave Mannoni put it, still haunts 'whites who have never left Europe'. It is as if colonialism had an afterlife.[45]

In the sociophobic era of decomposing neoliberalism, the kinds of civic organisation that traditionally uphold social distinction and segregation – often through vigilante violence – scarcely exist. The lone wolf killer appears in the gap. Mair was described by police as a loner, with no friends, no job and no romantic partner. He suffered long-term unemployment and was afflicted by what he described as 'feelings of worthlessness', typical of class injury. He had received treatment for obsessive-compulsive behaviour, and neighbours described how he scrubbed himself with Brillo pads until he bled. The press described his residence as extraordinarily neat. Inside his

kitchen cupboards, the *Guardian* reported, 'tinned food was carefully arranged in precise rows, with each label pointing in exactly the same direction'. Alongside tidy stacks of publications about Hitler, the Nazis and the white race, he kept tidy stacks of toilet paper, as if to wage war on shit.[46]

Somehow Mair's misery was cathected to, wired into, his fear for the 'white race'. A curious detail about this is that, when Mair was a child, his parents split up, and he was taken to live with his mother and her new husband, with whom she had a mixed-race son. Mair lived in that family home through years in which he was known for his frequent racist remarks, and in which he was collecting neo-Nazi publications, right up until he committed his act of murder. Decades before he planned and executed his assault, he was a keen follower of the South African far right and the US white power movement, a subscriber to and correspondent with segregationist publications. To the editor of *SA Patriot*, a South African white power magazine, he wrote that in both Britain and South Africa, 'the White Race' was in danger at the hands of 'mobs of Reds and Blacks'. With the eclipse of apartheid, he wrote, the 'white race' was struggling for its existence. The fault lay primarily with 'collaborators', 'white liberals' and 'traitors'. In his end of days, a 'traitor' would die.[47]

Mair had evidently been contemplating this for some time, having been fascinated with David Copeland's bombings in 1999. But it took until June 2016 for him to pass from the fantasy to the act. What happened in the interim? Mair lived in Birstall, a town near the city of Bradford in West Yorkshire. In the seventeen years between conception and action, West Yorkshire had been a hub of right-wing radicalisation. The first flashpoint was a series of riots that ripped through three deprived former textile towns in the industrial northwest in the summer of 2001, culminating in violence in Bradford.

The spark was supplied by fascist parties, the National Front and the BNP, marching on the towns and attacking local Asians. Yet these towns were ready to explode. Since the decline of unionised industries, the jobs market was segregated and low wage. Local councils effectively segregated housing and schools. Police criminalised young Asian men, particularly Muslims, treating them as a menace to white communities. The same police appeared to be indifferent to a string of attacks on Asian taxi drivers, and when local youths tried to fight back against the far-right provocateurs, the

police response was brutal. There followed a string of racist mob attacks on Asians and Asian property. The official Cantle Report, investigating the riots, emphasised the culpability of 'self-segregating' Asian communities for the violence. This response ignored institutional racism, deprivation and official policies of segregation, and it downplayed the instigating role of fascism. The report laid the foundations for the New Labour government's turn away from diversity and towards demands that minorities 'integrate' into 'British values'.[48]

In the ensuing years, the BNP racked up votes and recruited members in West Yorkshire by agitating against British Asians, and particularly Muslims. In the era of the 'war on terror', they adjusted their propaganda by claiming that Islam was trying to conquer Britain and turn white society into a 'multi-racial hellhole'. After 2010, when the BNP succumbed to internal splits, its role was taken up with gusto by the far-right Eurosceptic party, the UK Independence Party (UKIP), which broke out of its genteel southern English redoubts through the violence of its rhetoric against Muslim minorities. Exploiting news of grooming gangs involving a group of men largely of South Asian descent, UKIP claimed that the 'innocence' of white children had been 'sacrificed on the altar of multiculturalism'. Its leader Nigel Farage responded to terror attacks like the assault on the offices of Charlie Hebdo in Paris by claiming that such attacks were a predictable result of 'mass immigration' and the failure of 'multiculturalism'. Muslims, he insisted, would have 'split loyalties' between Britain and the Islamic State. Further immigration, he argued during the Brexit campaign, would lead to a surge in sexual assault on British streets.[49]

Such claims were not invented by fringe far-right parties. It was the newspapers whose coverage of terrorism had demonised Islam. It was politicians, including New Labour frontbenchers, who had encouraged this. It was the subsequent Conservative government which claimed that 'state multiculturalism' had failed, and which promoted the extraordinary racist conspiracy theory, based on a forgery, that jihadists were plotting to take over Birmingham schools. It was, again, the press whose coverage of grooming gangs wrongly singled out British Pakistani men, while raising public alarm about such menaces as 'halal' meat in Pizza Hut. It was a Labour MP who wrote of the grooming gangs: 'Britain has a problem with

British Pakistani men raping and exploiting white girls.' Witches and demons were everywhere.[50]

The success of UKIP was to link this atmosphere of panic to its agenda of exiting the European Union. As Farage put it when he heard that UKIP's sole MP Douglas Carswell opposed making 'immigration synonymous with EU membership': 'Fucking hell. I spent ten years trying to do that!' Typical of this strategy was Farage's claim that the EU might shortly offer passports to the types of men who had carried out sexual assaults in Cologne, Germany, on New Year's Eve 2015. Since these were alleged to be mainly men of North African background, the claim made no sense even on its own racist terms. However, Brexit propaganda, promoted by the mainstream Conservative 'Vote Leave' campaign, asserted that Turkey was about to become a member state of the European Union. The campaign's visuals suggested that this would somehow draw both Syria and Iraq into EU borders. Thus, in the metonymic logic of racist dreamwork, Asians, Muslims, Pakistanis, refugees, Turks, Syrians, Iraqis and North Africans are all much the same: one displacement is as good as another. Linking Europe to 'mass immigration', to the inability to 'control our borders', and to 'floods' of immigrants bringing terror, crime and rape gave the issue a potency that it lacked when opposition to the EU was about competition rules, 'metric martyrs' or 'bendy bananas'. 'Taking back control', like 'building the wall', would stop the whites becoming black.[51]

On the evening of 15 June 2016, just over a week before the vote to leave the European Union, Thomas Mair sought help for his depression. He was reaching a breaking point. He had evidently been thinking about the lone wolf solution again, since he had collected newspaper clippings about Breivik's murder of seventy-seven people in 2011. He had spent the afternoon of 15 June in Birstall library, researching 'lying in state', 'lying in repose', 'pauper's funeral' and 'coffins' on the library computer. A dead official would 'lie in state', while a dead man with no money, family or friends would have a 'pauper's funeral'. As though he were weighing up two kinds of death. He also researched matricide, as though the mother were the race traitor. Mair was unfortunate in having to rely on a decimated mental health infrastructure, which had been even more run down by the government's austerity policies. The main treatment for depression offered by the NHS was cognitive behavioural therapy, which is cheap but only deals with surface attitudes and behaviors. Mair visited an alternative

therapy centre specialising in spiritual and holistic approaches. He was told to book an appointment for the next day. Instead, embarking on a final counterattack upon desire, the following afternoon he set out with his modified hunting rifle and knife and waited for the local Labour MP, Jo Cox, outside Birstall library.[52]

Mair brought the gun for killing efficacy and the knife to get up close and personal. He shot Cox, then fell on her and stabbed her repeatedly in the chest with a dagger, then shot her again, twice. It was an act of erotic overkill. As Jacqueline Rose has written of the suicide attacker, each assault is ‘an act of passionate identification – you take your enemy with you’. As he carried out this attack, he shouted: ‘Britain first, keep Britain independent, Britain will always come first.’ In court, he gave his name as ‘death to traitors, freedom for Britain!’ According to police, the coming Brexit vote was a ‘motivating factor’ in his decision to kill. It might be more accurate to call it a trigger. Hours before the attack, UKIP had revealed its Brexit poster, portraying a flood of brown faces pouring into Europe with the headline, ‘Breaking Point’. On the evening of the result, UKIP leader Nigel Farage celebrated by saying that it had been achieved ‘without a single bullet being fired’.[53]

5

The Armed Shitstorm: Murderous Nationalism

‘O that thou shouldst give dust a tongue
To cry to thee,
And then not hear it crying! all day long
My heart was in my knee,
But no hearing.’

– George Herbert, Denial

> *If we Hindus in India grow stronger, in time these Muslim ‘Friends of the League’ types will have to play the part of the German Jews instead.’*
>
> – V. D. Savarkar, ‘the true son of Mother India’ according to Narendra Modi, 1949[1]

I.

Somewhere in their dreams of renewal and plenty, they must have conceived of it. These sanguinary dreams – their blood flowing, their bodies tortured and set on fire – must have been awaiting their moment of fulfilment. The Concerned Citizens Tribunal remarked on the ‘macabre delight’ of the spectators. As evening fell and cooled the air, and the pyroclastic clouds of hate settled, they played cricket with the skulls of the slain. Some just stood by and smirked at the survivors emerging, shaking, exhausted and dizzy, from hiding.

The Gujarat pogrom, in which police officers had been both spectators and killers, had been replete with murderous ecstasies. A participant confessed to helping in the murder of a man who was methodically cut to pieces with a sword until dead and then set on fire. A mother had watched in horror as her three-year-old baby was raped and killed in front of her. Another woman, who was also made to watch her child being murdered, was gang raped, set on fire and left for dead. Another found her sister-in-law's body in her garden, with her throat cut and genitals mutilated. A terrified survivor had come out of hiding to find bodies of women burned, with iron rods 'shoved up their vagina'.[2]

A lethal fascination with Muslim women's bodies pervaded the frenzy. A pamphlet distributed in Gujarat praised the state's chief minister, Narendra Modi: 'Narendra Modi, you have fucked the mother of *miyas* [Muslims] … She was fucked standing while she kept shouting. She enjoyed the uncircumcised penis. With a Hindu government the Hindus have the power to annihilate *miyas*.' The words and actions of the pogromists in their violent aphrodisia recall the 'male fantasies' of the German Freikorps, who were enthralled and terrified by 'Red women', 'proletarian whores' with weapons under their skirts, communist *femmes fatales* who arrive in 'floods', 'tides', 'waves' and, by representing communism, also represent dissolution. As Barbara Ehrenreich puts it: 'In the brief moment of penetration – with bullet or knife – he comes close, thrillingly close, to her and the horror of dissolution.' Yet as Tanika Sarkar points out, this wasn't a male-only assault: women from the Hindu right were there, calling out for more. Achin Vanaik observed that the pogrom set a new precedent for the participation of historically subordinate groups, including 'large numbers of Dalits, Tribals and women'. The rapes were justified to Hindutva activists with the claim that Muslim women, by reproducing, were the source of a demographic assault on India. When asked about the rape of Muslim women, a leader of the Samati, said: 'They have raped so many of us, we must now rape some of them.'[3]

The pogrom began a year after the Gujarat earthquake in January 2001, which killed 14,000 people. The state government, ruled by the Hindu nationalist BJP, had been heavily criticised for its dismal response to the tragedy. They had already been losing ground electorally and, after the earthquake, lost two by-elections. Salvation arrived for the ruling party at the end of February 2002, however, when a coach on the Sabarmati Express

burst into flames a kilometre outside Godhra train station. On board were dozens of *kar sevaks*, Hindu pilgrims belonging to the rightist party Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP). The VHP was, like the BJP, an offshoot of the fascistic Rāṣṭrīya Svayaṃsevak Saṅgh (RSS) and, like its sister organisations, had been involved in the mob demolition of the Babri Masjid a decade earlier. On the train journey, the *kar sevaks* repeatedly assaulted Muslim passengers and buoyantly chanted sectarian slogans like '*Muslim Bharat Chodo, Pakistan Jao!*' (Muslims, quit India! Go to Pakistan!). When, amid the chaos, the train stopped a kilometre down the track from Godhra station, a coach caught fire. Fifty-eight bodies were recovered.

The Gujarati government, ruled by Chief Minister Narendra Modi, quickly blamed it on a mob of 2,000 Muslims throwing firebombs at the train, aimed at the *kar sevaks*. The government even suggested, as the troops of Indian and Pakistani armed forces faced one another across the border and as both states engaged in nuclear tests, that the attack was a plot instigated by the ISI, Pakistan's secret police. According to Hindutva myth, this was continuous with a thousand years of Muslim aggression against a primordial Hindu *rashtra* (nation), from the earliest caliphates to modern Pakistan.

Both the Concerned Citizens' Tribunal and the Justice Banerjee Commission concluded that the fire was accidental. Nonetheless, it served as a useful trigger. In the days following the fire, the VHP called for a shutdown to protest the deaths. With incitement from the state government, and support from police, mobs of armed Hindu nationalist killers descended on Muslim residential areas of Ahmedabad, Gujarat's largest city. They set fire to apartment blocks. They threw rocks and acid bombs and set upon men with iron bars. At least 250 girls were gang-raped and then burned to death. Children were force-fed petrol and set on fire. Women were attacked with acid. An estimated 2,000 people, mostly Muslims, were killed. Another 2,500 were injured, and 150,000 were forced to flee to relief camps. According to a VHP leader, the pogrom was 'the first positive response of the Hindus to Muslim fundamentalism in 1,000 years'.[4]

The murder, for all its obvious recreational élan, was strategic. The violence reached its crescendos in areas of the most intense electoral competition. Muslim families were driven out, housing segregation was intensified and in the afterglow of the pogrom support for the BJP soared. This was a well-established pattern in recent Indian history: communal riots

occurring in the year before any election in the two decades before the pogrom lifted the BJP vote by at least 5 per cent. Paul Brass describes an 'institutionalised riot system', in which Hindu nationalist militants systematically organise communal violence to consolidate ethnic solidarity before an election. The final phase of this 'riot system', following preparation and incitement, is *post hoc* rationalisation wherein politicians and media outlets gloss over the frenzy with artful euphemisms. In Gujarat, the BJP issued press notes that carefully referred to the Godhra fire as 'inhuman genocide' while describing the pogrom as 'disturbances'. The government and local media assiduously both-sidesed the pogrom as yet another 'communal' clash, despite the 15:1 ratio of Muslim to Hindu deaths.

Modi spent the summer after the pogrom leading a series of 'Hindu Pride' rallies demonising the Muslims who had just been assaulted *en masse* by a collaboration between the state and volunteer pogromists. According to Rana Ayyub, the riots made Modi 'a hero among the majority Hindu population' in Gujarat. He was even portrayed as a 'sex symbol', anticipating his future description as 'the most eligible bachelor in India' by Bollywood actress Mallika Sherawat. The front rows for his speeches were always reserved for women who led the chants of 'Kill him! Kill him!' when Modi named a particular folk devil of the Hindutva imagination or cheered with ecstasy when he threatened that Pakistan would be wiped 'off the map'. In the state legislative elections in December 2002, Modi campaigned on the theme of Islamic terrorism, and the ties of Muslim migrants to Pakistan. The BJP and their allies made a point on campaign stops of hailing George W. Bush and Ariel Sharon as co-partners in the war on terror. The BJP, rescued from its mishandling of a natural disaster by the successful prosecution of a coordinated disaster, increased its share of the vote from 44.81 per cent to 49.85 per cent.[5]

For the participants, who included Hindu nationalist students, high-caste or wealthy persons, police, some petty criminals recruited specifically to carry out attacks and a great many 'ordinary people', the rewards undoubtedly included discharge of anxiety followed by an unforgettable sense of omnipotence. A young Leon Trotsky, writing of the pogroms in Russia in 1905, observed that the 'man without shoes' had 'become king'. He who was 'a trembling slave hounded by the police and by hunger' now felt 'like an absolute despot', 'master of life and death'. 'If he feels the urge

to do so, he throws an old woman from the window of the third floor to the pavements below, he smashes the skull of a baby with a chair, he rapes a small girl in front of a crowd of people.' Such a man is momentarily permitted everything by the state. He can 'do anything he likes, everything will pass'.[6] And this is an image of the future.

II.

Disaster nationalism, ever enlivened by its savage fantasies, is even more invigorated when those fantasies can be enacted. In the past, there was an obvious tension between electoralism and the pursuit of collective violence.[7] That is no longer as obvious. Under far-right governments in India, the United States, Brazil and the Philippines, collective violence has become, far from a source of politically damaging shame, the cutting edge, the unique selling point. The strategy of revenge, beginning as electoral mobilisation and cyberwar, setting off random 'lone wolf' detonations, comes into its own when the logic of the emotional contagion or the online shitstorm hits the streets, armed.

Notable, alongside the performative cruelty and licensed depravity as law enforcement either enable or partake of the killing, is the overt encouragement of popular violence by disaster nationalist leaders. Consider the spate of political murders during the Brazilian presidential election campaign in 2022. Among them were the killing of a Workers' Party official, shot dead at his fiftieth birthday party in front of his children. In another instance, Benedito Cardoso dos Santos, a farm-worker from Confresa, was gun-whipped and then killed with an axe by a supporter of Jair Bolsonaro during a political argument. What made these killings different from 'lone wolf' terror was that they were part of a wider political climate in which the election campaign, like that in 2018, was marked by a string of attacks, street battles and even abductions and sexual violence. And that climate was officially sanctioned. Within hours of the murder of Cardoso dos Santos, Bolsonaro gave a speech in which he said Workers' Party supporters should be 'machine-gunned'. This wasn't offhand rhetorical extravagance. Bolsonaro had used similar rhetoric in 2018. And he suggested, as he had many times before, that the left should be eliminated from national politics.

In saying this, Bolsonaro was keenly aware of his armed and fanatical base, who were given to approaching Workers' Party canvassers, flashing their guns and threatening reprisals for a party they deemed communist and traitorous. He also had direct ties to paramilitaries running Brazilian towns and cities – with the indulgence of police and politicians – who had killed political enemies such as socialist councilwoman Marielle Franco. Far from association with such violence damaging Bolsonaro, it appeared to rally his base: he saw his support recover from close to 30 per cent in pre-election polls to just shy of 50 per cent on polling day.[8]

Or consider the Israeli settler rampage in the West Bank village of Huwara in February 2023. Hundreds of settlers descended on the village with weapons, beating residents and setting properties on fire, ostensibly in revenge for an earlier killing of a settler. In Israel, this was widely called a pogrom. The settlers, acting on the belief that the whole of historic Palestine is theirs by divine right, had not just recently discovered the joys of such punitive raids. For decades, their colonising mission had been funded, indulged and militarily defended by the Israeli state, though not without occasional restraint and criticism. For years, they had engaged in violent expeditions, arson attacks and lynchings in surrounding Palestinian areas, generally with impunity, and often in collaboration with Israeli soldiers: 'joint settler-soldier militias'. The violence, meant to express sadistic settler suzerainty, in some cases forces residents to quit.[9]

In Huwara, the perpetrators had new reason to be confident of impunity: as Shira Rubin reported for the *Washington Post*, with a new far-right government incorporating the Jewish-supremacist Jewish Power and Religious Zionist parties, they believed the state was on their side. They were right. Not a single person was prosecuted for their role in the pogrom, and most of those arrested were quickly released. Within days of the pogrom, government finance minister Bezalel Smotrich said that the village should be 'wiped out' by the Israeli army. This was not the first example of eliminationist language from a government minister. In 2008, for example, Israel's deputy defence minister threatened Gaza with a 'holocaust' over Hamas's use of Qassam rockets. Yet, however telling the phrase, that was a thuggish description of bloodily punitive military raids that materialised in the form of Operation Cast Lead. This was a call for state support for the goals of a pogrom that had just been carried out.[10]

It is in this calculated use of mobs, vigilantes and lynchings, from Delhi to the West Bank, that disaster nationalism accumulates much of its strategic force, as well as its 'anti-systemic' credentials. Mob violence, though invariably cruel, isn't necessarily fascist. From 'samosud' in early twentieth-century Eastern Europe to 'necklacing' in modern South Africa, it appears wherever the moral order is threatened and the state response is felt to be inadequate. Many modern states, such as those that emerged in the Russian empire, Greece or the United States, built their authority by taking control of existing violent gangs who implemented rough justice. But far-right politics rarely appears for any length of time without expressing itself in some form of parapolitical violence. Indeed, as Richard Saull observes, nascent paramilitarism was present in the earliest prototype of modern far-right politics, the Bonapartist dictatorship that quelled the 1848 revolution in France.[11]

Paramilitarism, particularly its assault on civilians, was pivotal to fascism in a way that it wasn't for the parliamentary right. Prefigured in the violence of Russia's Black Hundreds, who orchestrated many of the hundreds of antisemitic pogroms in defence of the Tsar during the 1905 democratic revolution, it was also conditioned by the unprecedented exposure to mass death in the First World War and its consolatory transfiguration into national 'glory' in the aftermath. The most violent organisations emerging in that period, such as Italy's black-shirted *squadristi*, Germany's brown-shirted Sturmabteilung, the Iron Guard (Romania), the Falange (Spain), Heimwehr (Austria) and the Ustaša (Croatia) were strategically essential to fascism because they coerced opponents, won the respect of bystanders, energised electoral campaigns and socialised fascist militants. Paramilitaries often had pedagogical functions. For example, the Stormtroopers were from the beginning both a 'battering ram' of the Nazi Party and an instrument for the education of members, since in their lightning strikes on Jews and communists they were supposed to embody the ideal of the 'political soldier'. Violence, Michael Mann writes, was key to fascism's 'radicalism': 'They overturned legal forms by killings.'[12]

Over and above these strategic purposes, fascist violence was grimly performative, binding the thrill of transgression, the self-satisfaction of punitive moralism, and the demonstrative violation of victims in a supererogatory outburst. Edward Weisband refers to this kind of

imaginative cruelty as the ‘macabresque’. Victims are made to scream for the benefit of their tormentors, to confess, to perform their anguish, to betray themselves, their sense of reality, and that which ‘they most cherish’. Consider, for instance, Hindutva activists compelling their Muslim victims to chant the slogan ‘Jai Shri Ram’ before beating them to death. Weisband refers also to a ‘surplus enjoyment’ achieved in the elaborate staging of the violence during paramilitary raids as much as in camps, ditches, killing fields, torture chambers and death marches. Think, for example, of the Blackshirts forcing their battered victims to swallow castor oil as they rampaged through working-class neighbourhoods with the connivance of police during the Fascist March on Rome in 1922. Or of the Stormtroopers during a wave of Nazi terror in 1932, having murdered a Polish man they mistakenly thought was a communist, forcing his brother to stand with his face to the wall while they beat him with truncheons and a billiards cue for half an hour until he lost consciousness. The violence always exceeded its strategic justifications. The enjoyment in that excess may have even been compounded by its illicitness, given official prohibitions on ‘wanton’ atrocity.[13]

The violence, subtended by the perdurable fantasy of a ‘world plagued by them’ becoming a ‘world without them’, was already genocidal in embryo. Just as the lone wolf hopes to trigger a ‘race war’ in which the enemy will be destroyed, so the fascist militia man was practicing for a final campaign of extermination. Their assaults, Aristotle Kallis writes, were ‘a feasibility test, a symbolic dress rehearsal and “licence” for realising the extreme utopia of nation-statism’.[14]

And yet, at a certain point, the fantasy of a ‘world without them’ is destined to turn suicidal. Once unconscious fantasy has been recruited in support of racist ideology, so that the sense of internal distress is cathected to the idea of a racial Other to be annihilated, no amount of killing or performative cruelty will finally scratch the itch. Adorno writes, for example, of the compulsive escalation built into antisemitic ideology. The antisemite ‘simply cannot stop’, carried away by a logic which begins with petty grievances and accusations, and spirals to ‘the wildest conclusions, tantamount in the last analysis to the pronouncement of death sentences against those whom he literally “cannot stand”’. He cannot sleep ‘until he has transformed the whole world into the very same paranoid system by which he is beset’. The racist needs his racism, so that even if every last one

of ‘them’ is wiped out, either another bogey-scapegoat is found or the violence turns inward. And if the escalation is forcibly halted, it results in a mania of collective suicide. In the final year of Nazi terror, for example, a clearly defeated regime responded with a desperate, suicidal programme of internal repression, propaganda exhorting Germans to fight to the last second, death marches intended to prevent the Red Army from finding Jewish inmates alive, and finally the Wehrmacht’s bombing of German cities. To prevent Bolshevism from looting the Fatherland, Goebbels wrote, ‘Germany must be made more desolate than the Sahara.’ Fascism, as Deleuze and Guattari had it, liberates a popular desire for suicide.[15]

Like fascism, disaster nationalism elicits popular participation through armed raids on political enemies. Today’s collective violence, emanating in most cases from a ‘thin’ civic society and convoked primarily through the internet, is more decentralised and networked than in classical fascist movements. In practice, it is neither wholly coordinated nor purely spontaneous. What we tend to see instead is *distributed violence*, combining elements of top-down control and spontaneous contagion, wherein responsibility for incitement, organisation, killing and after-the-fact justification is spread over a network. Likewise, popular violence is neither purely opposed nor purely colluded in by the offices of the state, especially experienced ‘violence professionals’ as Charles Tilly calls them, such as the police. The concerned states have exhibited a contradictory attitude to such movements, sometimes enabling or even participating in their attacks, other times controlling them. But the trend is towards a fusion between legal violence and far-right extra-legal violence.

This is one of the dangerous signs of what Ugo Palheta dubs ‘fascization’, wherein ‘the authoritarian hardening of the state and the rise of racism’ permit a dialectic of mutual radicalisation between the popular right and disaster nationalist leaders.[16] Rhetorical incitements to violence give confidence to vigilantes and militias. Acts of public violence against the putative enemies of the nation energise otherwise wayward or drifting nationalist leaderships. They in turn endorse those acts, organise a public defence, pass new laws against the nation’s enemies and work to create new flashpoints for further ruptures. And far from damaging the far right politically, this violence appears to build its support while smoothing over the tensions between its populist appeals and hard-headedly capitalist political economy.

This dialectic between the leadership and the mob is raised to its fullest intensity in a genocidal regime, in which a radicalised minority catalyses the state's offensives against 'anti-nationals'. Otto Dov Kulka, in his work on popular mobilisation in the Third Reich, shows that in the run-up to the Nuremberg Laws (1935) and Kristallnacht (1938), the Nazi leadership was being pressured to act by violent demonstrations and pogroms. The riots that erupted before Nuremberg were largely driven by mass hysteria about Jewish 'race defilers' (Jewish men having sex with 'Aryan' women), which even a member of the Gestapo described as a kind of 'psychosis'. The Nazis had every intention of destroying German Jews, and it was often Nazi party members who instigated such actions. However, some of this turmoil was potentially precipitous for the regime. In the first years of the regime, statements about Jews were, as Robert Gellately puts it, 'notable by their absence'. Most Germans were not radical antisemites. Moreover, the tumult, in which cops were frequently called 'Jewish lackeys' if they intervened, risked causing a rift with police who had thus far been smoothly integrated into the Third Reich. Local authorities, under popular pressure, were acting on their own initiative to prevent marriage between Jews and 'Aryans', arrest 'race defilers' and forbid Jews from flying the German flag. The same pattern of agitation occurred before and during Kristallnacht. The regime radicalised its base with intense propaganda, who in turn catalysed and consolidated the regime's agenda.[17]

This record challenges the once popular image of fascism as a total state in which civil society has been crushed. The problem in the Third Reich at least was not the absence of civil society. Civil society was terrorised. It was fully permeated by the apparatuses of the Nazi state from the Gestapo to the Hitler Youth, to the point where any distinction between consent and coercion melted away. But it was also an instrument in terror: the masses were deployed against the masses. And the coerced consensus behind the Nazi regime did not fall apart, according to Ian Kershaw, until the middle of the war when it became clear that Hitler was leading Germany to disaster. Even after the war, surveys of those who had lived during the regime showed that half had positive memories of it.[18]

Some of this can be explained by the utopian element of Nazism. Even as the regime spent a fifth of its budget on rearmament, it offered moderate increases in living standards and invested haltingly in producing 'popular' consumer items. It also promised that with 'living space' (*Lebensraum*),

Germans would reverse the humiliation of Versailles and reach a much higher standard of living. Nonetheless, even though living standards rose in the Third Reich (in contrast to Fascist Italy), the average worker was consuming significantly less in 1938 than in 1928. The Nazis restored industrial profitability far faster than they restored living standards.

In truth, as Richard Grunberg suggests, the 'psychological improvement was outpacing the material advantage'. To what did that psychological surplus correspond? Thomas Kühne's somewhat crude answer is murder. 'Perpetrators and bystanders', he writes, flattening the enormous differences between active participants in the *Volksgemeinschaft* and its invigilated subjects, 'energized social life and built collective identity through committing genocide.' This buries an alarming truth in an extravagant exaggeration: that for the core support at least, the psychological surplus was derived from participation in the regime's efficient selection and destruction of enemies.[19]

In the political economy of the far right, then, collective violence has a vital role. In the contradictions, breakdowns and paralysis of far-right governments, it displaces the problem, finds and punishes those 'to blame', asserts bloody borders around a national community whose moral claims are worthy of consideration, consolidates core support while terrorising and dispossessing potential enemies, and in so doing lays the foundation for new waves of capital accumulation orchestrated and justified on a 'national' basis. As we've already seen, the contemporary far right does not even pretend to offer class 'transcendence'. But its project of muscular national capitalism is closely bound to its offer of violent catharsis.

The canary in the coalmine, as far as this trend in recent history goes, is the 'Gujarat model'. According to myth, this refers to outstanding growth achieved in the Indian state when Narendra Modi was chief minister. The growth was achieved primarily, and in contrast to the welfarist 'Kerala model' (referring to the communist-run state in the South), by cutting benefits and transferring resources to corporations. This signalled a decisive break in traditional far-right political economy, in which the BJP had once claimed to speak for 'Gandhian socialism', in favour of authoritarian neoliberalism. Sounded to its source, however, the much eulogised and mythicised 'Gujarat development model' is founded upon a moment of spectacular, near-genocidal violence. That violence decisively mainstreamed Hindutva ideology, consolidated Modi's electoral support

and permitted an immediate turn to the pro-corporate policies of the ‘model’.

III.

The Gujarat pogrom took place just as the Islamophobic excrescences of the ‘war on terror’ were propelling radical-right parties up the polls in Europe.

This was hardly surprising. However much Western governments publicly disavowed racism, their policies frequently targeted Muslims as a problem population *en bloc*. In the United States, the war was the occasion for a surge in racial and religious profiling. In the UK, the Prevent strategy embedded systems of surveillance among Muslim communities who were told by Prime Minister Blair to address the ‘evil within’ their people. In France, securitarian logic was leveraged into culture war strategies targeting the Muslim minority on behalf of ‘republican values’, as in the ban on face veils and the state of emergency introduced in 2015.[20] As the BJP had insisted in the months after the Gujarat pogrom, the French government was policing the line between civilization and savagery that was also being drawn by Tony Blair, George W. Bush and Ariel Sharon.

Beyond that, the barbaric practices of the ‘coalition’ in the war inevitably fed back into a barbarous discourse in the war-making states. The torture chambers of Abu Ghraib, Bagram and Guantanamo, the arming and training of grisly death squads such as the Wolf Brigade in Iraq, and the airborne desolation and defilement of rebel cities like Fallujah, Tal Afar, al-Qaim, Haditha, Samarra and Ramadi all stood at jarring contrast to the humanitarian justifications for invasion. Inevitably, the factions of the commentariat who had taken up posts as co-belligerents in the war on terror felt more at liberty, as their humane façade crumbled, to offer extenuating excuses or justifications for torture and bombing, or to vilify Islam, borrowing the ‘demographic’ obsessions of the far right and partaking of a weird mix of humanitarian condescension, spite and erotic interest with regard to Muslim women. It was only logical for many voters that if ‘they’ were threatening enough to mandate such alarmist rhetoric and far-reaching state interventions in daily life, then ‘they’ must be as dangerous as the far right said they were.

However, given the Washington liberalism invoked to justify the 'war on terror', and its embodiment in international agreements, the Gujarat pogrom could not at that stage be overlooked or condoned as later such violence was. Narendra Modi was targeted for severe international censure and visa restrictions. This was far from unanimous: the White House, which had enjoyed a close strategic relationship with the BJP-led government that ruled India during the pogrom, quietly opposed the State Department's move to withdraw Modi's visa.[21] Nonetheless, it seemed that for the moment Modi was internationally disgraced.

In the state of Gujarat, however, a consolidated BJP administration started the process that would change perceptions fundamentally. Control of the state handed the BJP enormous resources in their effort to frame Godhra, not the pogrom, as 'inhuman genocide'. The state government appointed the Nanavati-Mehta Commission to support the narrative. The police and the judicial system did all they could to abet the story of a Muslim plot. Dozens of people who would later be acquitted spent up to nine years in jail, without bail, as their alleged role was investigated. All the initial arrests were later found to be wrongful. The alleged mastermind of the plot, a community leader named Hussain Umarji, was acquitted since the evidence against him was either hearsay or unsubstantiated testimony. Even so, thirty-one out of ninety-four accused persons were convicted, with the trial court referring to a 'conspiracy' that it was unable to verify or substantiate with detail.[22]

The Modi administration in Gujarat was also freed to pursue vendettas against critical journalists and human rights activists, and Modi's rule was characterised by numerous 'fake encounters' – extrajudicial executions staged to appear as though they had happened in gun battle. Between 2002 and 2006, Amnesty International documented thirty-one such murders. Among those killed was a nineteen-year-old woman, Ishrat Jahan, whom Modi branded a 'terrorist'. It turned out that she, along with three companions, had been shot dead in cold blood by police, who then moved their bodies and planted an AK-47 in the hands of one of the dead men.[23]

Most importantly for Modi's long-term legitimacy, beginning in the years 2002–3, the administration embarked on the 'Gujarat model'. The state slashed spending on public services to incentivise corporations for the purposes of major infrastructural development. This reflected a recent turn in Indian nation-building. Having led a 'non-aligned' camp of Third World

nations seeking an independent path to development, following neither Washington nor Moscow, in the 1990s India turned to branded nationalism. Henceforth, as Ravinder Kaur explains, the nation-state became the brand name for assets which, if privatised and deregulated, would attract investment and unleash a flood of capital that would decisively lift India out of its violent colonial past. Indian states were encouraged to compete with one another on the criteria of how easy they made things for investors. India was 'open for business', with 'visions of economic growth tied to hypernationalist dreams of a glorious ancient-modern future'.[24]

The BJP's opponents, agreeing with the neoliberal nostrums guiding the experiment, had limited room to criticise the Gujarat model. Indeed, Congress politicians frequently lavished praise on it. For example, to the glee of the Modi administration, as early as 2005 Gujarat was ranked the best state in the country for 'economic freedom' by the Rajiv Gandhi Foundation, headed by none other than the former president of the Indian National Congress, Sonia Gandhi. (Modi repaid the Gandhi clan by advertising this praise in the newspapers and then, while president, having Congress leader Rahul Gandhi tried on absurd charges of defamation.) Yet economists studying the supposed surge in growth found it to be a statistical illusion, with Gujarat doing no better than it had before. Meanwhile, public spending on health fell to 0.8 per cent of state income, while education cuts resulted in 45 per cent of workers being poorly educated or illiterate. Ninety-four per cent of the workforce was employed either informally or in sectors with low wages and benefits.[25]

Within just over a decade after the pogrom, Narendra Modi had become prime minister of India, with his campaign bruiting the success of the 'Gujarat model'. The promise to extend the model to the rest of the country, unleashing a muscular capitalism shorn of disabling welfarist constraints, resonated not only with businesses but also with a middle-class uneasy about India's failure to match China's spectacular growth patterns. Modi was celebrated by US politicians for his 'inspiring' 'economic reforms', welcomed to the White House by President Obama, feted by Silicon Valley CEOs and voted *Time* magazine's 'person of the year'. The *Economist*, which after all had not scrupled to support General Pinochet, hailed the 'strongman' who could 'unleash India' and 'give India its best chance ever at prosperity'. The *Investors Chronicle* was enthused that poor Indians had abandoned 'entitlement politics' in favour of a 'pro-growth' agenda.[26] The

ruling classes whose feathers were ruffled over Trump's election and the Brexit vote had already by that point demonstrated a certain tolerance for capitalism with pogromist characteristics.

The myth of muscular capitalism has consistently outpaced the reality. Modi's first term showed little sign of the unshackling of growth that the Gujarat prospectus had advertised. Official figures, increasingly unreliable, showed healthy growth – but no better than under previous governments. Income figures, which the government sought to suppress, showed that average consumer expenditure fell in real terms by 3.7 per cent between 2011–12 and 2017–18. What the Hindutva regime did deliver on was colonising the courts and universities with its allies and filling the public space with incitement. Between 2016 and 2019, there were 4,500 recorded instances of communal or religious riots in India. Although that represented a decline in the number of riots, the number of riot victims increased – suggesting that the riots were becoming bloodier. The number of hate speeches by politicians, overwhelmingly those affiliated to the BJP, rose by 490 per cent after 2014. There were hundreds of lynchings of Muslims, often by Hindu vigilantes enforcing state laws protecting cows. Numerous states implemented anti-conversion laws promoted by Hindu nationalists and targeting Muslims.[27]

Yet the myth remains vital, as a container for the various promises – of development without redistribution for the poor, of upward mobility for the middle class, of global competitiveness and profitability for business, and of Hindu supremacy. In 2019, running for re-election, Modi claimed that Indian GDP would almost double to $5 trillion by 2025. In the same campaign, his party proposed a raft of new laws, above all the Citizenship Amendment Act (CAA) which for the first time limited citizenship based on religion, the National Register of Citizens (NRC) which excluded millions of poor citizens without documentation, and the revocation of Jammu and Kashmir's constitutional autonomy, thus allowing the Indian military to invade, arrest Kashmiri politicians and impose a dictatorship. The re-election of Modi on that basis catalysed the first major confrontation between the government and a mass opposition.

The passing of the CAA, recognised as a strike against Indian secularism, provoked nationwide protests beginning in December 2019, involving hundreds of thousands of people. BJP leaders reacted with fury, denouncing the protesters as 'Pakistani hooligans' and 'antinational', and

leading chants of ‘shoot the traitors’. In January 2020, Parvesh Verma, a member of parliament for the BJP, warned of the demonstrators: ‘These people will enter your houses, rape your sisters & daughters, kill them.’ In one of the inciting incidents of the pogrom, BJP politician Kapil Mishra told the police that if they didn’t clear the protesters away, he and the mob would. However, these interventions were mass spreader events in a contagion of incitements broadcast on social media by grassroots activists such as BJP volunteer Ragini Tiwari. ‘Whoever the traitor is cut them down,’ Tiwari said. ‘Cut them down … Kill or be Killed, whatever happens will see afterwards.’ According to an internal report, Facebook saw a 300 per cent surge in inflammatory content in the three months from December 2019.

After Mishra’s speech, hundreds of armed Hindu rightists in Delhi launched the attack. They swept through the city seeking out Muslims in the streets and in their homes, beating them to death and then setting them on fire. They chanted, ‘*Modi ji, kaat do in mullon ko* (Modi, cut these Muslims into pieces)’. Police refused to answer calls for help from Muslim areas. They were witnessed either standing by as the violence unfolded or helping the pogromists. A man recounted the murder of his brother-in-law in front of his children:

> They smashed the bed where Musharraf was hiding underneath and he screamed, so they grabbed him and dragged him out into the street. The children ran out, too, and were screaming. His daughter, Kushi – she is just 11 – fell on the feet of those men, pleading ‘Don’t kill my father’. She tried to save him but they beat him to death in the middle of the street and threw him in the gutter.[28]

In the aftermath, police declined to process most Muslim complaints and no action was taken against Kapil Mishra for his role in the pogrom. In the years since the pogrom, the lynchings have escalated and clerics broadcast incitements to genocide with impunity: ‘Kill two million of them.’ In villages and towns, brutal Islamophobic murders, euphemised as communal violence, have become a regularity. According to Genocide Watch, the processes typically leading to genocide are well under way in modern India. Three years after the Delhi pogrom in February 2020, a Morgan Stanley

report saluted Modi's transformative regime, and President Joe Biden welcomed Modi once again to the White House.[29]

The Gujarat pogrom demonstrated that, far from damaging a rightist party, collective violence could be among the materials out of which consent was built, and coerced. It could summon broad popular support for a regime that, like nationalist governments in Hungary, Brazil and the United States, imposed an otherwise unpopular autocratic neoliberalism. It also prefigured the ad hoc alliances between the state and volunteer killers, the fusion of DIY paramilitarism and electoralism, and the bonding of strategic ends with recreational mayhem that would later appear – albeit in by no means as gory a fashion – in the United States, Brazil, the Philippines and the West Bank. The pogrom made the career of Narendra Modi, helped turn the BJP into the world's largest party with over 100 million members (and a claimed membership of 180 million, twice as large as the Chinese Communist Party and ten times as large as the Indian National Congress), and decisively established the strategic viability of murderous nationalism in a modern democracy.[30]

IV.

This curious relationship between mass murder and political economy might best be expressed in a seeming paradox: death-squad populism.

In autumn 2020, the most popular political leader in the world was Rodrigo 'the Punisher' Duterte. The man who shut down opposition media, locked up political opponents, boasted of extrajudicial killings, and unleashed death squads and popular vigilantes on the Philippines' urban poor, enjoyed this polling boom after his militarised handling of the Covid-19 crisis caused the country to suffer the highest case rates in Southeast Asia. His approval rating hit 92 per cent: a level one normally expects to see in dictatorships. In fact, Duterte's broad popularity nationwide had been quickly established once he was elected, with 83 per cent approval ratings as early as December 2016. Although most people profess to dislike much of what he is doing, they strongly support him on the issue of 'fighting criminality', with 84 per cent supporting his campaigns against drugs. This is despite the fact that a similar majority (78 per cent) were either

‘somewhat worried’ (33 per cent), or ‘very worried’ (45 per cent) that they or someone they know could be a victim of an extrajudicial killing.[31]

Duterte had been elected amid a global shift in opinion against liberal democracy. In global surveys carried out between 1995 and 2014, there was a dramatic spike in the numbers of people preferring ‘a strong leader who does not have to bother with elections’ or saying that democracy is a ‘bad’ or ‘very bad’ way to run a country.[32] The Philippines was already a weak democracy, with low levels of popular participation and high levels of corruption, election rigging and political violence. The working class was poorly represented. Civil and human rights were seen, with some justice, as rights reserved for the middle class and the rich.[33] The level of poverty, for a middle-income country, remained shockingly high: in 2016, some 42 per cent rated themselves poor, while 30 per cent of children under five were stunted due to malnutrition. In Manila, the capital, a third of the population lives in slums. In the elite democracy that emerged after the fall of the Marcos dictatorship, a ubiquitous escape from misery was addiction to ‘shabu’ (methamphetamine).[34]

Duterte offered, in response, a different kind of high: the promise of high-octane paramilitary violence. This had an extraordinarily broad appeal, both for those excluded by the post-Marcos settlement, and those who had benefited. The political scientist Duncan McCargo reports the breadth of this enthusiasm in Manila: ‘The taxi-drivers were no surprise, but I was taken aback to find that academic colleagues at the University of the Philippines, the doctor who treated me for a cough, and even self-styled human rights lawyers were cheering on a candidate whose major campaign themes comprised valorizing his own masculinity, and solving policy problems through extra-judicial killing.’[35]

Just as Narendra Modi had taken power in India with his own legend as the Gujarati hard man, Duterte already had a reputation as the ‘Duterte Harry’ of the southern city of Davao. The ‘Davao model’ of economic growth had relied on rapid business permits, the violent suppression of crime, and the use of extrajudicial killings. The Davao Death Squads (DDS), also affectionately known to the presidential candidate as ‘Diehard Duterte Supporters’, were part of the appeal. At the same time, Duterte hosted a regular television programme in Davao called *Gikan sa Masa, Para sa Masa* (From the Masses, to the Masses) in which he named inefficient

bureaucrats and suspected criminals.[36] Violence and infotainment built Duterte's reputation as a tough man who cared about ordinary people, and whose no-nonsense attitude got things done and made the economy boom. Extraordinarily, in the 2016 presidential election, 96.6 per cent of residents of Davao City voted for him. And as he presented the Davao model to the nation as a muscular development strategy, he promised: 'Forget the laws on human rights. If I make it to the presidential palace, I will do just what I did as mayor.' As president, he lived up to his word. Not only did he deploy police and death squads, but he incited members of the public to take vigilante revenge on drug addicts, telling workers: 'If you lose your job, I'll give you one. Kill all the drug addicts.'[37]

The incitement to vigilantism is a familiar technique in Philippines politics, having flourished as a strategy of repression in the early post-Marcos era during which Duterte built his career. The strategy makes it impossible to tell government and vigilante violence apart, since vigilante groups are routinely set up by elements in the police or the ruling class. According to *Human Rights Watch*, the police routinely ascribe their own death-squad killings to vigilantes. The advantage of this was that anti-crime vigilantism tended to expand into a war on opposition. State security forces under Duterte, for example, rehabilitated the old practice of 'red-tagging' activists as communists or terrorists, thereby encouraging vigilante violence against them. What was different about Duterte was that he bragged about it: 'I'd go around in Davao with a motorcycle … and I would just patrol the streets, looking for trouble also. I was really looking for a confrontation so I could kill … In Davao, I used to do it personally. Just to show to the guys [police] that if I can do it why can't you.'[38]

The 'drug watch' list used by Duterte's death squads also predated his reign. In the year before Duterte was elected, a government order had instructed *barangay* (town or village) officials to support police 'drug-clearing' operations by compiling a 'confidential list of users, pushers, financiers and/or protectors'. Police then approached local community leaders and asked them to draw up local lists. These were to be as inclusive as possible. As one *purok* (division) leader said, he was told to include the names of whoever is 'using drugs, even if it was in the past'. Indeed, many addicts were killed after they had stopped using drugs.[39] Duterte, building on his previous practice of using thugs converted from the New People's

Army to kill thousands of petty criminals in Davao, made use of the weapons bequeathed to him by the 'democrats'.

The paradox of death-squad populism was that, while the guns were turned on poor communities, it was to a large extent the guns that won the support of the poor. In Duterte's moral politics, bullets drew a rigorous distinction between the deserving poor and the criminal element. The former were entitled to limited cash transfers and welfare, while the latter should be murdered in a publicly humiliating fashion in front of their horrified families. By eliminating drug addicts, he promised to improve the moral quality of the lives of the deserving poor. They would not feel degraded, frightened or harassed by crime on the streets. As Duterte's leftist critic Walden Bello put it: 'The thugs, the street-corner boys, are no longer there. Women can walk the streets safely. I don't know if their lives are actually better than before, but the perception is that they are. They're pro-Duterte because they feel he's cleaned up the place.'[40]

Death squads were also a form of 'economic populism'. 'Before a city or province can really prosper,' Duterte said, 'you have to establish order. So that the investors would be coming in, comfortable in their thoughts that there would be no corruption, that they are safe, and that their businesses will prosper.'[41] The majority of Duterte's economic agenda stressed continuity with the macroeconomic and trade policies of his predecessors. However, the promise was that if the country could be cleansed of its demoralising addicts, the bogey-scapegoats of the nation, it would thrive. The offer was uplift, material and spiritual, paid for in blood.

By June 2020, a UN report suggested that tens of thousands may have been killed. The International Criminal Court, in launching an investigation into state crimes committed by Duterte, estimated that between 12,000 and 30,000 people had been murdered. These included hundreds of human rights activists, and dozens of judges, mayors, lawyers and journalists. Of those killed, police took 'credit' for 6,215 as of October 2021. This suggests, even allowing for a substantial number of police killings disguised as vigilante murders, and also allowing for the activities of informal death squads, that among the murders there were many recreational or revenge killings, and that many citizens heard and acted on Duterte's plea for murderous cleansing.[42]

v.

I can't wait for Trump to give us the go-ahead to start beating the shit out of you people.

– Scott Hess of the Traditionalist Worker Party, to anti-Trump protesters, January 2017[43]

In February 2020, as the Delhi pogrom began, Donald Trump was visiting India for the *Namaste Trump* tour, a payback for the *Howdy Modi* event held in Texas the previous year. At the end of the visit, he spent an evening in the presidential palace, where he was treated to 'gold-leaf-crusted mandarin oranges, wild Himalayan morels, and gifts of Kashmiri silk carpets'. Six miles away, the mobs were beginning their assault while police officers helped them smash CCTV cameras.[44] The nuptials between Trump and Modi were perhaps not without tension since Trump's 'America First' policies limited the access of Indian capital and labour to American markets, but they were politically logical, and consummated in the year that Trumpism finally came into its own.

The electrifying effect of popular violence on Trumpism in 2020, the year of prophetic desire for the American right, is difficult to overstate. Through the militias protesting Covid-19 lockdowns, 'patrolling' Black Lives Matter protests and threatening to invade polling stations, Trump finally found the mutually radicalising relationship between leadership and base that he had been wanting since Charlottesville. When he did, the movement exploded into a frenzy of counter-subversive activity that drastically expanded Trump's voter base and culminated in the 6 January 2021 'insurrection', or 'Q-d'état', a meatspace incursion of the online Vendées in rebellion against the new woke order. This apocalyptic outburst against constitutional legality persuaded the historian of fascism Robert Paxton to abandon his objections to calling Trump a fascist.[45] That it resulted in just five deaths reflected only the relative inexperience and political indiscipline of the reactionary mob.

Trump's surprise victory in 2016, as he turned states like Florida, Pennsylvania, Michigan and Wisconsin red, had prompted seismic waves of jubilation from 'race realists', Christian Identitarians, Klansmen, alt-right activists, online channers and followers of 'Kek', Three Percenters, Oath Keepers, American Vanguard, the Proud Boys, Identity Evropa and their

alt-lite celebrity outriders. The core of Trump's broad appeal was his repudiation of trade agreements and his promise of a nationalist industrial policy that would, Gujarat-style, use government incentives to spur $1 trillion in infrastructure investment, creating 25 million jobs. But for the far right, this was the means to a political regenesis that would create an unassailable nationalist voting bloc and destroy their political enemies. As Steve Bannon put it, 'If we deliver … we'll govern for fifty years.' Their jubilee was edged with violence: a surge of racist attacks, and sexist assaults by 'pussy-grabbing' men, took place in the weeks before his election. In 2016 the reported number of racist assaults on Muslims exceeded the rate experienced in 2001.[46]

Shortly afterward, members of the Traditionalist Worker Party were lunching with Republican operatives, discussing how this Nazi sect could help bind disaffected whites to an overhauled GOP. The white nationalist Richard Spencer celebrated with a fascist salute before a crowd of supporters, shouting 'Hail Trump'. At his inauguration, Trump rhetorically affiliated himself with the 'America First' tradition, evoking the slogan used by nativists before and during World War I, the Ku Klux Klan in the 1920s and apologists for fascism in the 1930s. In office, Trump launched his presidency with a spectacle of power. He issued a blizzard of executive orders, emphasising his commitment to a Muslim travel ban and a border wall. He appointed allies, such as Islamophobic conspiracy theorist General Michael Flynn and the ex-Breitbart editor and white nationalist Steve Bannon, to the National Security Council. When the Supreme Court challenged Trump's Muslim ban, his advisor Stephen Miller expostulated: 'The powers of the president to protect our country are very substantial and *will not be questioned*.'[47]

Trump's display of potency, claiming executive power that would have exceeded that claimed by the Bush administration, was hollow. He was not at liberty to govern as he wished. Within less than a year, the incumbent was sandbagged on all sides, wrapped up in battles with the mass media, the Supreme Court, FBI investigators, Democrats and a Republican congressional leadership that would only permit him to govern if he accepted their agenda of incremental tax cuts for the rich. He adopted a version of Obama's foreign policy because it was recommended by the Pentagon: a genuflection signalled in April 2017 with a symbolic bombing in Syria. Soon, he was forced to lose his advisors, Bannon and Flynn. His

infrastructure investment never materialised: in fact, investment in America's dysfunctional roads, bridges, ports, airports and water, either stagnated or fell. The street movement, which might have energised his administration, ground to a halt after the torchlit 'Unite the Right' protest in Charlottesville, North Carolina, which in fact split the right. Trump was canny enough to signal what Steve Bannon called his 'default position' on the day after the murder of anti-fascist activist Heather Heyer, by declaring that there were 'very fine people on both sides'. But the violence was politically premature, an expression of the extreme voluntarism of the far right. What emerged was not an authoritarian state but what Dylan Riley called a 'patrimonial' executive, an enclave of power within the state ruled by Trump as patriarch. As Bannon lamented, the 'Trump presidency that we fought for, and won, is over'.[48]

With his afflatus sapped, and his uniquely Oedipalised Oval Office encircled, Trump faced a bitter electoral backlash in the 2018 midterms, and his failed attempt to get accused rapist Roy Moore elected as a senator for Alabama left egg on his face. His approval ratings, never very high, hit their lowest levels – revealing that his hardcore support was around 35 per cent of voters. Still, there were signs of ferment for the far right, with the rise of QAnon and the Proud Boys, a flurry of rightist attacks and killings, and a slew of white supremacists selected as Republican candidates in California, North Carolina, Virginia and Illinois. Trump, isolated in office, used his gift for short bursts of semi-articulate incitement on Twitter to work his base, including with the campaign of incitement against the 'squad' in July 2019 which foreshadowed the Kulturkampf of 2020. To parody Schmittian language, the Twitter sovereign decided the enemy.

Trump entered 2020 having waited out the Mueller inquiry, and Democratic impeachment efforts, forced through the nomination of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court and saw his personal approval ratings recover from 35 per cent to a high of 49 per cent. A range of rightist institutions had broadly shifted into the Trump camp, from the West Coast Straussians at the Claremont Institute, who later helped draft Trump's nationalist '1776 Report' as a riposte to Black Lives Matter, to the neoconservatives at the Conservative Political Action Conference, a Reaganite outfit which favoured Ted Cruz in 2016. He had scarcely made a dent in his promise of muscular national capitalism, but the economy seemed to be doing reasonably well. Most voters, polled, thought that

Trump would probably win in a tight battle with whoever the Democratic nominee was.[49] And then the plague struck.

Initially, Trump's response was contradictory – disparaging Covid-19 'hysteria' as the Democrats' 'new hoax', he also characterised the virus as the 'Chinese flu' and claimed that the Democrats would endanger American lives with 'open borders'. The mood music on the US right as early as March was that people would rather die for capitalist freedom than undergo a lockdown that would hurt the economy. Thus, Lieutenant Governor of Texas Dan Patrick, Brit Hume of *Fox News*, and Glenn Beck. For Peggy Noonan of the *Wall Street Journal*, 'red state' workers, long inured to difficult lives, stoical about death and yet alarmed about the economy, didn't need lockdown from the professional 'overclass'. Patrick Deneen, Catholic poetaster of 'working-class conservatism' agreed: it was the life-coddling 'elites' versus the necrophilic 'masses'. For Brett Stephens of the *New York Times*, social-distancing measures were 'New York rules'. The religious right spiritualised their embrace of Thanatos. *National Review* columnist Alexandra DeSanctis mourned that secularism had borne 'an outsized fear of death as the ultimate evil'. R. R. Reno, the Catholic intellectual and editor of *First Things*, agreed that social distancing was an 'ill-conceived crusade against human finitude', while masks were 'enforced cowardice'.[50]

Trump, though insisting that he would not be bullied by the 'lamestream media', was unable to immediately wire into this suicidal impulse. He could not consistently adopt the hard denialist position of Jair Bolsonaro or orchestrate an authoritarian centralisation of power in the manner of Narendra Modi. With American businesses plummeting into recession, he was reluctantly obliged to support a brief lockdown and a large stimulus package. These were, to add to the difficulty, broadly popular measures. Trump reverted, momentarily, to his real estate salesman pitch. Covid-19 would be gone by April, thanks to the heat. 'It's going to disappear one day. It's like a miracle.'[51]

Since Trump was not free to govern as he wished, he relied on the mobilisation of his base to build power outside of government. Already in March, there was a pattern of resistance to local Covid-19 safety measures. In parts of the United States, supported by a largely white middle-class population, sheriffs and public officials were ignoring or declining to cooperate with orders given by public health officials. Right-wing activists

and militia members formed a diffuse vanguard protesting those who ordered lockdown. Activists stalked and sent death threats to health officials who ordered lockdown, accusing them of harbouring a communist agenda. A study by Johns Hopkins University found that 57 per cent of health departments had received threats and harassment. Armed protests at town halls and public meetings brought together elements of Reaganite revanchism, Evangelicals, white supremacist militias, Proud Boys, the American Legislative Exchange Council, FreedomWorks and members of the Trump White House. By mid-April, when case numbers were at their highest, Trump was openly declaring for the protests: 'Liberate Michigan!', 'Liberate Minnesota!', 'Liberate Virginia!' Trump was once more using his office to popularise and mainstream deeply minoritarian groups and ideas.[52]

In May, the country was embroiled in its largest ever protest movement over the racist police killing of George Floyd. It was an overwhelmingly nonviolent movement: 93 per cent of the protests were entirely peaceful. But there was initially widespread public support for some symbolic acts of violence: a poll found that 54 per cent of Americans believed the burning down of Minneapolis police precinct was justified. This, a popular anti-racist movement that carried public opinion with it, and that challenged the foundation of law-and-order politics, was an extremely threatening development for the American right. Trump needed to reinvigorate the social fear of black disorder. He got his warning in early: 'when the looting starts, the shooting starts' – a phrase with a distinct segregationist vintage in US politics.[53]

Having previously cheered on the armed rightist vigilantes protesting lockdown, he was looking for the same militias to patrol the protests. This they did, often with the gratitude of police. In Kenosha, Wisconsin, police were recorded thanking the militias: 'We appreciate you being here.' Some militias, such as the 15,000-strong Utah Citizens' Alarm, formed almost overnight through social media. There followed, as a result, months of bloody and improbable happenings. Activists who had become accustomed to a frequently violent police response also had to cope with being randomly stabbed, shot at or run over in one of dozens of vehicular assaults by far-right activists apparently taking their cue from Heather Heyer's murderer. The lone wolf had become the armed shitstorm. The networked witch hunt had exploded into meatspace.

In this dialectic of mutual radicalisation, it was the Trump administration's move next. It had to be seen to be on the side of the armed shitstorm. Soon, accusing Democratic administrations of being unwilling to impose law and order, Trump was supplementing the ad hoc paramilitaries on the streets with federal paramilitaries despatched by the Department of Homeland Security. To the astonished anger of local authorities, they began abducting Black Lives Matter protesters. The administration's strategy of complementing vigilante violence was epitomised by the apparent extrajudicial execution of 'antifa' activist Michael Reinoehl, described by Trump as 'retribution' for Reinoehl's alleged killing of Patriot Prayer member Aaron Danielson.[54]

And then, the vengeful right found their folk hero. In August 2020, a young vigilante from Illinois, Kyle Rittenhouse, who had travelled to Kenosha with an AR-15-style rifle, shot dead two protesters and injured one. Rittenhouse immediately became the poster boy of redemptive violence for the American right. Trump defended him, the Christian right raised money for his legal defence, his mother was cheered at Republican events, and right-wing journalists like Tucker Carlson and Ann Coulter praised him for his efforts to protect the public from the leftist rabble. 'I want him as my president,' said Coulter. The White House instructed the Department of Homeland Security to sympathise with Rittenhouse in public statements. Rittenhouse, as a young, white, middle-class and clean-cut vigilante, personified the innocent self-defence of conservative Americans against a 'Marxist', 'terrorist' rabble which the police were unable to contain. It perhaps also helped, politically, that his victims were not black – unlike the majority of those killed during the protests. The Republican electoral campaign, energised, pivoted to a full-throated defence of the armed public as the last line of defence of order against chaos. Having campaigned in 2016 on the substantially true claim that Clinton was a beltway insider who didn't care about working-class Americans, Trump pivoted to claiming that the Democrats were actually run by communists seeking to destroy America.[55]

The American right was electrified by its own violence. A drifting presidency snapped into focus. What had split the right in 2017 united it in 2020. The summer of countersubversive violence was a necessary condition for the 'Stop the Steal' delirium that followed and Trump's attempt at a soft coup, documented by the January 6 Commission. Trump knew he could

rely on a mobilised base, appealing to activists to watch the polls for evidence of a stitch-up: a call duly heeded by neo-Nazis and Proud Boys, and by the armed vigilantes who threatened to descend on polling stations. After he lost to Joe Biden, Trump could depend on waves of delusory protests and a campaign of death threats bombarding politicians and election officials, as he pressured some of those same officials to 'find' him the votes he needed or to decertify Biden's win, demanded that the Department of Justice say 'the election was corrupt and leave the rest to me', and developed plans along with allies linked to the Oath Keepers militia for executive orders instructing the military to seize voting machines. The alliances formed between the White House and far-right militias during the summer and autumn ensured that when Trump called for a 'big protest' in Washington, DC on 6 January 2021, his close allies could rely on direct contacts to the Oath Keepers and Proud Boys to help coordinate events on the day. This gave Trump the confidence to ignore repeated warnings of armed violence, knowing that 'they're not here to hurt me'.[56] If this worked, if Trump held onto power despite defeat, his enemies would be fatally weakened. If it worked, Bannon's fifty-year Reich might materialise after all.

The 'insurrection' was, finally, an overreach. Ironically, it fell to his successor to implement a version of the nationalist industrial policy that Trump was unable to deliver (though on green-capitalist rather than overtly fossil-capitalist grounds), accelerate his trade war with China and quietly maintain his foreign policy orientations in respect to the Middle East (the Abraham Accords plus Jerusalem as the 'capital' of Israel), Afghanistan (troops out) and the Indian subcontinent. But as a direct rightist assault on legality, it could yet prove a symbolic breakthrough comparable to the far-right veteran march on French parliament in 1934, or more recently to the razing of the Babri Masjid by BJP and RSS militants in 1992. For now, the insurrection has inflicted significant damage on the armed wing of the American right, as leaders were jailed and whole chapters and branches of militia movements were shut down. As of 2022, however, even as the militias were weakened, the number of rightist non-militia groups had soared, as did white supremacist propaganda and hate crimes in big cities. Tens of thousands of 'poll observers', many convinced that Trump won the 2020 election, were being trained by Republicans to descend on polling booths.[57]

‘The system held, but barely,’ Rep. Adam Schiff said, speaking for the January 6 Commission.[58] This could well be an exemplary description of the state of contemporary democracy. For if a democratic system barely held against a coterie of far-right demagogues not known for their competence, and a neonate movement that was clearly not prepared for power, how will it fare against a more cohesive and developed rival? If the system barely held, the need for system change could not be more obvious. If nothing else, sufficient change was needed to drain the sources of far-right radicalisation. Yet the new administration existed precisely to avert system change. And it would shortly find itself allied with the Republican right and in open, full-throated collusion with a far-right government as it embarked on genocide.

6

Genocide: Shrouded in Darkness

Imagine how powerful I felt all the time … I could kick anyone in the head and nobody would talk. I could do anything I wanted. You are no longer controlled by the law; you feel that you are the law. As if the moment you pass from Israel to Gaza you are the law, you're God.

– Israeli soldier, describing his role in suppressing the First Intifada[1]

> *We submit that the crimes against humanity charged were committed as part of a widespread and systematic attack against the Palestinian civilian population pursuant to State policy. These crimes, in our assessment, continue to this day.*
>
> – International Crimincal Court, arrest warrants for Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu and defence minister Yoav Gallant[2]

I.

'My neighborhood was destroyed,' Mahmoud told his Medical Aid for Palestinians colleague, Rohan Talbot, at the end of October 2023. 'One single rocket hit a neighbour's home without warning and totally destroyed it. At least ten were killed including children. My neighborhood is full of the colour grey. I hate the colour grey now.'[3]

On the mornings after nights of thunder and screaming, as drone footage showed, Gaza was indeed a blasted and cauterised scar-land of favillous grey, asphalt grey, gunmetal grey, white phosphorous grey, smoke grey and corpse grey blotting out all life and colour. Rows of apartment blocks had been turned into smoking scree, slag and soot thoroughfares fashioned out of tourbillions of flying flame as though to welcome the four

horsemen, and even the air was wintry grey in the blazing sun as smoke escaped like ghosts from the newly formed hecatombs.

By the end of October 2023, 45 per cent of the homes in Gaza had been fully destroyed or severely damaged by Israeli Defence Force (IDF) bombing. Most of those were in the north of Gaza, whose residents had been ordered by Israel to flee with meagre possessions south of the Wadi Gaza, meaning that if the expelled were ever allowed to return their homes would no longer exist. 'Every few miles,' Steve Hendrix reported in the *Washington Post* on a midnight trip to northern Gaza, 'the sour stench of decaying bodies rose with the dust. Thousands of people are still believed to be entombed in the rubble.' By the end of December, closer to 70 per cent of homes had been destroyed.[4]

Those who were retrieved lifeless from the wreckage, lifted in the arms of adults who did not know their names, were caked in a silvery calcareous dust from forehead to foot. Worlds entire, obliterated. Two thirds of the over 14,000 killed as of late November, a number that did not include the 4,100 estimated to be buried under the rubble, were women and children. By January 2024, the number of the known dead had reached 23,000, approximately 1 per cent of the total Gazan population: this almost equalled, in three months, the number of Rohingyas genocidally killed in Myanmar over a period of two years.

Children in Gaza were killed faster by several orders of magnitude than in Syria under Assad's bombs, in Ukraine under Putin's bombs, or in Afghanistan under American bombs. In the first thirty days of bombing, Israeli forces killed 4,100 children, compared to 510 killed in twenty-one months of Russia's war on Ukraine. Those who survived were often unique in their bloodline, as entire extended families were wiped out, giving rise to a new, species-shaming acronym, WCNSF: 'wounded child, no surviving family.'[5] The United Nation Relief Works Agency, set up as a temporary body in 1949 to deal with Palestinian refugees, protested: 'The number of people being killed is so staggering, it can't be collateral. A ceasefire is overdue for the sake of humanity.'[6]

It was not collateral. For while anglophone media largely maintained a strict omerta on noticing what was happening, war on Gaza's civilian population had been advertised by Israeli ministers and military leaders. Palestinians, said Israeli defence minister Yoav Gallant as he announced a full siege on Gaza, cutting off food, water, electricity and fuel, were 'human

animals'. Energy minister Israel Katz used the same term in justifying collective punishment of Gazans. Israeli president Isaac Herzog insisted that 'an entire nation' was to blame for Hamas's actions, and that the idea of 'civilians not being aware, not involved' was 'absolutely not true'. Ariel Kallner, a member of Israel's Knesset belonging to Prime Minister Netanyahu's Likud party, called for another 'Nakba' (catastrophe) on the Palestinians, repeating the crime of 1948 in which approximately 750,000 Palestinians were ethnically cleansed. 'Right now, one goal: Nakba! A Nakba that will overshadow the Nakba of 48.' Another Likud politician, Tally Gotliv, called for the use of nuclear weapons on the defenceless population of Gaza: 'Jericho Missile! … Doomsday weapon!' She called for 'crushing and flattening Gaza … Without mercy! Without mercy!' An anonymous Israeli defence official briefed that Gaza would become 'a city of tents' where 'there will be no buildings'.

Sara Netanyahu's (Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's wife) advisor, Tzipi Navon, said that it wouldn't be enough to 'flatten Gaza'. Anyone suspected of involvement in the Hamas attack should have their nails pulled out, their genitals removed and their tongues and eyes saved for last 'so we can enjoy his screams', 'so he can see us smiling', 'Gaza needs to turn to Dresden, yes!', as far-right Israeli politician Moshe Feiglin bellowed in a television interview. 'Complete incineration, no more hope … Annihilate Gaza now! Now!' 'Creating a severe humanitarian crisis in Gaza is a necessary means to achieve the goal,' exhorted reservist major general Giora Eiland in Israeli newspaper *Yedioth Ahronoth*. 'Gaza will become a place where no human being can exist.' In a later article, he urged Israel not to be 'intimidated' by the international community's warning of epidemics in Gaza: 'Severe epidemics in the south of the Gaza Strip will bring victory closer.' Major General Ghassan Alian declared that in Gaza, 'there will be no electricity and no water. There will only be destruction. You wanted hell; you will get hell.'[7]

These annihilatory aspirations were then manifested in the battlefield. In the first week of its assault on Gaza, Israel claimed to have dropped 6,000 bombs weighing a total of 4,000 tons. Its targeting was guided by an artificial intelligence system called 'Habsora' ('The Gospel'). At least half of the targets were classified as 'power targets', referring to high-rise residential buildings where low-level government officials were thought to live, as well as universities, banks and government offices. In the first two

months of bombing alone, twenty of northern Gaza's twenty-two hospitals were bombed. By January 2024, every university in the Gaza Strip had been methodically destroyed. The bakeries, one of the few sources of food in the besieged strip, were systematically bombed. In a region where an eighteen-year blockade had already degraded the water and sewage infrastructure so that 95 per cent of the water in Gaza, most of which came from the sea, was undrinkable, Israeli bombs compounded the effects of siege by repeatedly bombing water facilities across the strip. Such automated savagery was not an Israeli innovation: the United States has led the way in efforts to automate bombing since 2004. And despite its oft-feted precision, its advantage is not accuracy but speed: creating 'multiple dilemmas across multiple domains at an overwhelming speed'.[8]

Israeli officials and their allies, defending the bombing campaign, compared it to the destruction of German cities like Dresden during the Second World War in which hundreds of thousands were killed. Although Gaza, far from representing the new Third Reich, had no state, army, navy or air force, the comparison was inadvertently revealing. The tactic of area bombing derives from the doctrines of Italian Fascist Giulio Douhet. According to Douhet, war in the age of nation-states is not between armies but between peoples. To win, one must destroy the civilian economy and terrorise the people, who will then break from and punish their leaders. This strategy, incipiently genocidal insofar as it seeks the destruction of a people, expresses the logic of armed nationalism in concentrated form. As the sociologist Martin Shaw explains, war on specific enemies always tends to degenerate into war on the populations that support them. For Douhet and his followers, however, area bombing was not the degeneration but the perfection of war. By breaking the enemy earlier, they believed, implausibly enough, it might even save lives.

The doctrine first gained credibility through being tested by the British and French on colonial populations in Iraq, Somaliland and Syria: 'savage people', they said, needed to be terrorised. But it never worked. And in Dresden, Hiroshima, Vietnam and Iraq, area bombing neither broke civilian morale, nor undermined their support for their leadership, nor deterred military leaders. However, it was cheaper than ground operations, and it spared soldiers' lives by making civilians undergo the risk of death. Automated air war, digital Douhetism, brings another advantage. Historically, as Richard Holmes documents in his history of war, soldiers

often refuse to shoot the enemy. They can rebel or be traumatised. But automation further abstracts killers from the killing scene, inducing a 'Playstation mentality': as one American drone 'pilot' put it, 'killing people is like squashing an ant.'[9]

Israel's digital Douhetism is based in its 'Dahiya doctrine', named after a Beirut suburb pulverised by the Israeli air force during its 2006 invasion of Lebanon, and first tested out during Operation Cast Lead in Gaza in 2008–9. The doctrine allows Israel to deliberately target and destroy civilian infrastructure on the basis that it would, a source explained to the *Guardian*, 'create a shock' in Palestinian civil society, leading them to 'put pressure on Hamas'. Shortly before Cast Lead, Israeli interior minister Meir Sheetrit said that in the event of a rocket attack, the IDF should 'decide on a neighbourhood in Gaza and level it'. During Cast Lead, ostensibly launched in retaliation for Hamas strikes that Israeli attacks had in fact provoked, the UN noted that the war was 'directed, at least in part' at 'the people of Gaza as a whole'. Similar conclusions were reached by UN reports on subsequent Israeli assaults in Gaza, Operation Pillar of Cloud (or Operation Pillar of Defence) (2012) and Operation Protective Edge (2014). The Habsora system helped radicalise and accelerate the nascently genocidal character of the Dahiya doctrine.[10]

The culture of genocidal racism was ubiquitous. As the destruction unfolded, a Telegram channel known as '*72* Virgins' and run by the IDF broadcast sadistic images of dead Gazans to Israelis, who were asked to share them widely. The messages accompanying the videos exulted: 'Burning their mother … You won't believe the video we got! You can hear the crunch of their bones. We'll upload it right away, get ready.' 'Exterminating the roaches … exterminating the Hamas rats … Share this beauty.' 'Garbage juice!!!! Another dead terrorist!! You have to watch it with the sound, you'll die laughing.' Israeli soldiers also posted waggish footage of themselves larking among the ruins of Gaza: staging mock classes in bombed out schoolrooms with no children, pawing through the possessions left behind in deserted Gazan homes, stealing said possessions, giggling at the discovery of lacy underwear, knocking emphatically on a door only to reveal it is no longer attached to a house, gleefully pressing the button to blow up entire neighbourhoods. The joke in every case was that Gaza had been obliterated.[11]

This destruction, combined with the siege, also unleashed terrifying waves of hunger and disease. While outbreaks of Hepatitis A, influenza, diarrhoea and meningitis ripped through the population, by January 2024 half a million Gazans were estimated to be literally starving and the rest were in various states of food emergency. According to Save the Children, deaths from famine could shortly exceed the deaths from bombs and bullets. Alex de Waal explained: 'The rigor, scale and speed of the destruction of the structures necessary for survival [in Gaza], and enforcement of the siege, surpasses any other case of man-made famine in the last 75 years.' By March 2024, it was estimated that 1.1 million Gazans were in famine, while most of the rest were in a state of 'emergency'. A study by the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine (LSHTM) and the Johns Hopkins Center for Humanitarian Health finds that because of the threats of epidemic outbreaks and military escalation, excess deaths over and above the death toll from military violence (then estimated at over 30,000) could reach anything between 58,260 and 85,750. The total would approach 5 per cent of Gaza's population. This coupled with the declaration of a full siege against 'human animals' amounted to 'prima facie indication of a first-degree "famine crime"'.[12] Gaza was subjected to a permanent state of biological emergency.

Early in the war, because of Israel's statements and actions, experts and peace activists began to raise the question of genocide. After a week of assault, the Israeli historian of the Holocaust, Raz Segal, described Israel's indiscriminate war on Gazan civilians and its assault on the conditions for life for the whole community as 'a textbook case of genocide'. Stefanie Fox of Jewish Voice for Peace was no less pungent: 'This is genocide.' Genocide historian Omer Bartov, noting that 'Israeli leaders and generals have made terrifying pronouncements that indicate a genocidal intent', called on the world to 'stop Israel from letting its actions become a genocide'.[13]

II.

Have I not, however, arbitrarily skipped past the inciting incident that led to the war? At 6:30 a.m. on the morning of 7 October 2023, Hamas and

several other militias attacked the south of Israel, ultimately killing 1,200 people, including 859 civilians.

The assault, starting with an attack on police stations and soldiers, rapidly devolved into an unconscionable massacre of kibbutz residents and people attending the Supernova music festival, and the capture of 240 hostages, including children and the elderly. Israel also alleges that there was systematic sexual violence, though conclusive evidence of that has yet to emerge. Israeli officials have gone so far as to call this attack the real 'genocide', and Hamas equivalent to both the Islamic State and the Nazis. The far-right former Israeli prime minister Naftali Bennett, challenged about the civilian death toll on *Sky News*, exploded: 'Are you seriously keep on asking me about Palestinian civilians? What's wrong with you? Have you not seen what's happened? We're fighting Nazis!' Prime Minister Netanyahu calls Hamas a 'genocidal terror organisation'.[14]

According to Israel, the attack was unprovoked and therefore it had a full right of self-defence. And given the nature of the enemy and its propensity to hide among civilians, a degree of collateral damage was unavoidable. Yet for any of this to add up to sense let alone plausibility, the Hamas-led attack would really have to have been unprovoked, and it wasn't. If one wanted to explain what happened, one could not arbitrarily start history on 7 October 2023 and skip past decades of prior violence. The immediate origins of this attack, at least, can be traced to at least five years beforehand.

In March 2018, tens of thousands of Gazans, refugees in their own land, began to march peacefully towards the reinforced fence surrounding Gaza. Gaza had been under blockade since the Israeli 'disengagement' in 2005, with the siege ramping up after the Islamist group Hamas won the Palestinian legislative elections in 2006. It had been under direct Israeli occupation since the 'Six Day War' of 1967 during which Israel smashed Arab armies and conquered the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Gaza, Syria's Golan Heights and Egypt's Sinai. And it had been home to a Palestinian refugee population since the Nakba of 1948, during which the Zionist paramilitaries that would become the IDF ethnically cleansed approximately 750,000 Palestinians through terror and massacres which killed 15,000 people.

As those Gazans began to march in an act of 'Gandhian' civil resistance of exactly the kind that Western liberals often claim to support,

Israel declared the march zone an ‘area of terror’ (combat zone), despatched teams of snipers and applied ‘illegal open fire regulations’. Under a hail of bullets and tear gas, hundreds of Palestinians were killed and tens of thousands, including almost 9,000 children, were wounded.[15] It was as this was taking place that approximately a dozen armed factions in Gaza formed the ‘Joint Operations Room of Resistance Factions’. Taking part were Islamist groups like Islamic Jihad, secular nationalists like the al-Aqsa Martyrs’ Brigades (affiliated with Fatah, the ruling party in the West Bank), and Marxist organisations like Abu Ali Mustafa Brigades (affiliated with the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine).[16] The stated goal was, given the moribundity of the old Palestinian Liberation Organisation and its reduction to warden of the Israeli occupation, to achieve discipline and coordination across all resistance groups in Gaza and beyond.

The 7 October attack, though Hamas-led, involved two thousand fighters from a dozen armed factions across the ideological spectrum. Beginning at 6:30 a.m., the insurgents launched up to 5,000 rockets at Israel. Though 90 per cent were intercepted, the fleet was sufficient to overwhelm Israel’s powerful ‘Iron Dome’ anti-rocket system. Drones launched explosive devices at the surveillance antennae and automatic machine guns stationed around the Gaza fence. Fighters flew into southern Israel using hang-gliders and paragliders, secured the area, then helped those remaining in the Gaza Strip to break through the fence with bulldozers and explosives. Others attempted an amphibious assault with less success.

Squads of fighters then set up roadblocks on Route 232 running from north to south along the Gaza Strip and strafed whatever vehicles approached with bullets, before descending on four military bases in Zikim, Re’im, Nahal Oz and Erez. Teams of dozens of men with maps and addresses of those in charge of security took control of a series of kibbutzes, immediately killing whoever resisted. Footage shows the fighters kicking and stabbing the bodies of Israeli soldiers they’ve killed, shouting, ‘Here you go, child-killers!’ They also killed civilians, some possibly in exchanges of fire with local police and military, but many execution-style. The worst of the killing of civilians began when, the military base at Re’im having been taken, the fighters arrived at the Supernova music festival happening nearby. Although it seems they hadn’t expected to discover the festival, they took it as an opportunity to kill and take hostages.

While the planning for this operation was centralised, the execution was decentralised. When the military resistance was overwhelmed far more quickly than expected – most IDF soldiers having been sent to the West Bank to expedite the colonisation mission there – they suddenly had time and opportunity they hadn't planned for. It fell to individual commanders and fighters to take the initiative. Michael Clarke of the RUSI think tank infers that the military leadership 'lost control of the operation as soon as it began'.[17]

It is still unclear how many of the 859 civilians died at the hands of Palestinian fighters, and how many were killed in chaotic Israeli counter-offensives. The Israeli military has shown such indiscriminate savagery in attacks that it routinely kills its own soldiers: in Gaza, it claims close to one-sixth of its battle fatalities were due to 'friendly fire', mostly through bombing. IDF troops also killed three Israeli hostages who were surrendering to them. And Israeli media report several instances of IDF killings of Israeli civilians on the day of Operation al-Aqsa Flood. *Ha'aretz* reports that families of Israelis killed by IDF tank shells in the Kibbutz Be'eri are seeking an investigation. The same newspaper reports that fire from an Israeli military helicopter killed at least some of those who died at the Supernova music festival.[18]

But most were probably killed by Palestinian fighters. Among these killings many were likely mindless, spontaneous acts of revenge by men who had known only occupation and siege and had every expectation of dying that day. Most of those killed or taken hostage were not Israeli war criminals, and some were even among the brave minority of peace activists, enemies of the regime of occupation and blockade who, in the current Israeli political environment, would run the risk of being put in solitary confinement for expressing their views.[19]

The brutality of the 7 October attack was, as Israeli journalist Haggai Matar wrote, 'a sliver of what Palestinians have been feeling on a daily basis under the decades-long military regime in the West Bank, and under the siege and repeated assaults on Gaza'.[20] But with the attack, Hamas also declared that it would no longer secure Gaza for Israel, dealt a lethal blow to a desiccating Palestinian Authority, and ended the 'normalisation' talks between Israel and Arab states intended to sideline the Palestinians, probably for good. It also induced the Israeli state, evidently complacent and bereft of creative thinking about Palestine beyond imaginative ways to

plan its destruction, into a course of action that would lead to its being prosecuted at the International Court of Justice on charges of genocide. And it drew Israel's allies into a pattern of escalating militarisation and domestic repression, characterised by bellicose support for Israel's actions, in which liberal officialdom was just as culpable as the far right.

In the United States the Biden administration, having obliviously adopted Trump-era policy on Israel-Palestine only for it to go up in flames, vehemently defended Israel's actions amid growing criticism from its staff and dissent in the State Department. Ignoring the political character of the regime, and refusing to acknowledge its overt racism and expressions of genocidal intent, Biden willingly embarrassed himself by needlessly claiming to have seen evidence of babies beheaded by Hamas. When Israel basely claimed that the al-Shifa Hospital was a Hamas 'command and control' centre in order to justify a military attack, Biden claimed to have seen evidence of that too. He repeatedly bypassed Congress to hasten the transport of arms to Israel and his spokespeople denounced calls for a ceasefire as 'repugnant'. While the Senate smeared protests as antisemitic, and the House of Representatives passed a bill equating anti-Zionism with antisemitism, universities banned groups organising protests like Jewish Voice for Peace. Rather than attempt to restrain Israel's actions, the Biden administration initially went to bat for Israel's demand that Egypt should host the expelled Gaza population in tent cities in the Sinai, with Secretary of State Anthony Blinken receiving a curt 'no' from Egyptian dictator General Sisi.[21]

In the UK, far-right home secretary Suella Braverman vilified protests as an 'intimidating mob', and at one stage appeared to invite far-right protesters to attack Gaza demonstrations, while the right tried to get them banned. The media defamed protests as 'hate-swollen faces marching in anti-Semitic demonstrations', and 'thousands' of people talking about 'jihad'. The foreign secretary refused to condemn the siege on Gaza as a war crime in breach of the Geneva Conventions, while the Labour opposition repeatedly insisted that Israel had the 'right' to such measures, only to later claim after multiple resignations that this was never intended. In both Berlin and France, peace marches were banned. Only the sheer dauntless scale, tireless persistence and tactical diversity of the protests, and importantly the exponential growth of Jewish groups challenging Israel's claim on Jewish identity, prevented a more severe crackdown.

Across Europe and North America, meanwhile, the very fact of mass pro-Palestinian sentiment provoked a wave of scandal as to the possible role of TikTok in radicalising younger generations. Campaigning in the Republican primaries, Nikki Haley went so far as to falsely claim: 'We really do need to ban TikTok once and for all, and let me tell you why. For every thirty minutes that someone watches TikTok, every day, they become 17 per cent more antisemitic, more pro-Hamas.' In reality, social media platforms were shown to be suppressing pro-Palestinian speech under pressure from Israel, with Human Rights publishing a scathing report on Facebook's 'systematic censorship'.[22]

Within months, Biden's foreign policy was in ruins. One of his main commitments had been to pivot away from the Middle East and Afghanistan to focus on competing with a rising China. Among his first acts in government was to reverse the Trump administration's classification of the Houthi movement in Yemen as a 'foreign terrorist organisation', and abandon Washington's long-standing support for the Saudi-led bombing of the country. Yet, as the Houthis responded to Israel's assault on Gaza by blockading the Red Sea, bringing global shipping through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait down by 40 per cent, the United States and Britain began bombing Yemen. This was not even expected to work. The Houthis had survived eight years of Saudi-led bombing and were still the *de facto* government of Yemen. So feeble was the case for bombing that Biden, asked if the strikes were working, replied: 'When you say working, are they stopping the Houthis? No. Are they going to continue? Yes.' Meanwhile both belligerents, though clearly risking regional war just to spare Israel the trouble, perversely insisted that the bombing of Yemen had nothing to do with Gaza.[23]

The incipient fascism of a tiny state in the Mediterranean ought not to have had such terrifying international consequences. However, because of Israel's importance as a lynchpin of Western foreign policy, its allies willingly followed it into geopolitical disarray and moral abyss. Palestine proved to be, in a curious way, the symptom of the world-system. The United States and its allies portrayed their stance as 'solidarity' with Israel, and in an obvious sense it was. In practice, however, their solidarity was with a far-right government and its rabid support base. If they cared nothing for the Palestinians, they cared little more for the predicament of Israel's

remaining leftists and peace activists, who now faced both police and mob violence.

Under the control of far-right national security minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, the most repressive instincts of Israeli police were liberated. The chief of police warned that there would be ‘zero tolerance’ for such dissent and that protesters would be sent to Gaza ‘in buses’. The police spokesperson said anyone who dared protest ‘in support of Gaza or the Nazi terror organization that committed a Holocaust here’ would soon be ‘behind bars’. So it proved, as police took to preemptively shutting down most such protests, assaulting and arresting participants. When a teacher posted anti-war sentiment on Facebook, students rioted, he was dismissed from his job, and police put him in solitary confinement. Even after a court ordered his reinstatement, the school said it could not guarantee his safety amid constant student protests. When journalist Israel Frey expressed sympathy with the Palestinians, he was assaulted in his home by a far-right gang, spat on and insulted by police when he was evacuated, confronted by another mob when he was taken to hospital, and forced into hiding.[24]

Here was the ominous collusion between police and armed thugs, the classic spiral of mutual radicalisation between leadership and mob, hastened by war. As elsewhere, it thrived on an engorged sense of victimhood. It may be argued that, after all, Israelis were victimised on 7 October. But in fact, many of those most directly hurt by Hamas’s attack were among the most vocal critics of war in a society where support for Israel’s periodic wars on Gaza had usually been supported by at least 90 per cent of the public. Bereaved families, the families of hostages and some of the hostages themselves once released, coalesced in fierce opposition to Netanyahu’s war. In the words of one grieving father: ‘I lost my daughter, not my mind.’[25]

The victimhood at stake here is one rooted in Israel’s characteristic ways of seeing Palestinians. Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir once said with infamous sanctimony: ‘We can forgive the Arabs for killing our children. But we can never forgive them for forcing us to kill their children.’ In the lugubrious tradition of ‘shoot-and-cry’ Zionism, Israel was victimised even when it killed. In the current era, a more psychopathic species of victimised sentimentality has emerged, as when Benjamin Netanyahu responded to a call to remove West Bank settlements by calling it ‘ethnic cleansing’.[26] Israel is victimised when it is criticised, victimised

when it kills, victimised by Palestinians, victimised by the UN, victimised by a hostile world and victimised by traitors within. As with other species of disaster nationalism, the Israeli right thrives on a cycle of threat and release through violent assertions of omnipotence.

If Israel lost its mind, it is because it was always losing its mind. Israel was founded on the assumption that the Palestinians did not matter, or even really exist as a people. They were expected to either disappear or be crushed. The short-lived optimism of post-war Israeli society was based partly on this expectation. The persistence of the Palestinians as a people, rather than as a discarded, doomed slum population that could be safely ignored, is among the reasons for the growing pessimism and compensatory cults of redemption in Israeli society. Palestinian persistence means that the settler-colonial roots of Israeli society will never recede into the past as they have in other societies, while the exclusionary nature of Jewish nationalism can never be normalised. In this context, as Israel has become a more violent and wildly unequal society, it has careened brutally, and not without some cries of alarm from its remaining liberals, towards disaster nationalism.

III.

The Zionist movement, from its inception, embodied a mass of contradictions. A secular movement that, as Jacqueline Rose argues, lifted ‘the terms of messianic destiny’ straight from the Jewish faith. A Jewish national movement which Hannah Arendt called ‘the only political answer Jews have ever found to antisemitism’, yet which disliked actually existing Jews. A settler-colonial movement without its own army or metropole. A movement seeking a ‘land without a people for a people without a land’, though every land it considered was already copiously peopled.

As a millenarian movement, its cringe at existing Jews was attached to its desire for a new, powerful, muscular Jew. In explaining themselves, its theorists often sounded like antisemites. Theodor Herzl wrote: ‘When we sink, we become a revolutionary proletariat … when we rise, there rises also our terrible power of the purse.’ Ze’ev Jabotinsky, the founder of rightist Revisionist Zionism, was even more direct: ‘The Yid is ugly, sickly, and lacks decorum, we shall endow the ideal image of the Hebrew with

masculine beauty.' Nachman Syrkin contrasted the 'puny, ugly, enslaved, degraded and egoistic' Jew with the 'great, beautiful, moral and social' Jew of the Zionist future. Amnon Rubinstein remarks that early 'Zionist literature abounded' with such images: 'The old-time Jew contrasted with the newly born Hebrew; the Diaspora Jew with the native Sabra; the Yid of yesteryear with the resurrected Maccabee; the inferior Jew with the super-Jew'.[27]

As a European settler movement, which was as muscular as it got, it was uncertain as to its destiny. It aimed to colonise a land – Argentina, Uganda, Palestine – 'without a people' but, lacking arms, it needed the tutelage of a European power to do so. Hence, Herzl suggested that if the movement settled on Palestine, as it did, the Jewish state could form 'an outpost of Europe against Asia, an outpost of civilization as opposed to barbarism'. Its alliance with the British empire caused of the earliest divisions in the movement, between those who favoured relying on British guns and the more militarist right wing who favoured building Jewish arms in Palestine. To succeed, the movement ultimately used both strategies: benefiting from British military protection and training, while also building the military power that would eventually be turned on the British army to hasten its departure, and then on the indigenous population.

The core contradiction was that Zionism's 'land without a people' did not exist. Having settled on Palestine, the movement was preoccupied with the question of how to make Palestinians disappear. They could be 'spirited across the borders', Herzl suggested, or might be induced to 'fold their tents' and 'silently steal away'. The movement settled for 'compulsory transfer', in the words of David Ben-Gurion, Israel's first prime minister and leader of Labour Zionism. Jabotinsky put it succinctly: 'There is no choice: the Arabs must make room for the Jews in Eretz Israel.'[28]

Unable for most of the interwar period to build significant military strength, it relied on alliance with the British while building the basis for a segregated economy with businesses and a trade union federation (Histadrut) that excluded Arabs. Through collaboration with the British Mandate during its suppression of the anti-colonial Arab revolt of 1936–9, the movement began to develop the military capacity to achieve its goals. By the 1940s, the dream of Palestinian absence had become a real aspiration supported by intelligence gathering and military planning. As Israeli historian Ilan Pappe documents, the leaders of the incipient state had

collected detailed information on all Palestinian villages, their resources and their population. They had planted spies in Arab villages and compiled lists of those who had participated in the revolt or were thought to be politically active. They had accumulated surveillance photography, much of it supplied by the British.[29]

In December 1947, days after a UN resolution indifferently handed over more than half of Palestine to the new state of Israel with no input from the Palestinians, the cleansing operations began. The destruction and dispersal of the Palestinian national movement following the Arab revolt also provided the opportunity. In the early stages, Palestinian disorganisation was a problem: the first attacks sought to provoke action by Palestinians that could justify 'retaliation', a technique imparted to the movement by British officer Orde Wingate, but most villages continued with life as normal. They turned, therefore, to 'aggressive defence', by stealing into villages in the dead of night, selecting houses at random and blowing them up or strafing them with bullets while the occupants slept.[30]

From March 1948, units of the Haganah paramilitary, the kernel of the future Israeli army, were given lists of villages to cleanse. Operating under the rubric of 'Plan Dalet', they would attack their targets, sometimes in coordination with far-right paramilitaries like Irgun or the Stern Gang, with flamethrowers, barrel bombs, tank shells, aerial bombardment or showers of bullets. Typically, they would attack on three fronts, leaving one direction open for the population to flee, then demolish evacuated villages so that there could be no return. They poisoned village water supplies, carried out numerous rapes and conducted at least two dozen massacres, in villages like Deir Yassin, Tantura, Balad al-Shaykh and Ayn al-Zaytun. A total of 530 villages were destroyed, and 15,000 Palestinians were killed. On Janet Abu-Lughod's conservative estimate approximately 780,000 people were displaced as of the signing of the Armistice in 1949, the vast majority expelled in what Rosemary Sayigh calls 'a leaderless trek of thousands of dazed and panic-stricken villagers, their bundles of bedding dropping by the wayside, families separated, old people dying of exhaustion, children carrying younger children, babies dying of dehydration'.

The majority of this took place before a rag-tag and scarcely motivated alliance of Arab armies intervened from 15 May and were promptly crushed. The new state claimed close to 80 per cent of the land, with the West Bank falling to Jordan's control under the terms of a secret agreement

with the Hashemite monarchy and Gaza to Egypt's control. This still fell short of the Zionists' ambitions: Ben-Gurion had hoped that Israel would span as far north as the Litani River in modern Lebanon, to the northeast into Syrian territory twenty miles south of Damascus, and as far east as 'the furthest edge of Transjordan'. The remaining Palestinians were placed under severe military rule for eighteen years, thousands held in pens and prison camps, to ensure that there could be no thought of reversing the outcome of what Israel called its 'war of independence' and Palestinians called the Nakba.[31]

Nor did the cleansing cease there. Between 1949 and 1952, a further forty Palestinian villages were depopulated, often to make way for a kibbutz movement that was in principle leftist and committed to binational coexistence.[32] Nonetheless, 1948 represented the partial achievement of a dream of Palestinian disappearance that proved impossible to fulfil in its totality. It was the formative condition for Israel's existence. The leaders of the Zionist movement, writes Pappe, 'had counted on creating a pure Jewish state'.[33] Instead, there were 160,000 Palestinians living in the state of Israel, while the refugee population refused the sad diminuendo planned for them. Foreign minister Moshe Sharett thought the Palestinian refugees would be 'crushed', 'die', 'turn into human dust and the waste of society'. The world powers backing Israel sought the permanent 'resettlement' of refugees: such was the goal behind the creation of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) in 1949. Palestine remained Israel's dirty little secret, the evidence to be concealed. The depopulated villages were turned into public parks or kibbutz land. The ethnic cleansing was denied in official historiography. Even the existence of Palestinians was denied: 'There was no such thing as Palestinians,' Israeli Prime Minister Golda Meir asserted in 1969.[34]

The Palestinian refusal to fade into the annals of history manifested itself first in small acts of resistance, such as cross-border raids on settlements by individual *fida'iyyun* (fighters) from Gaza's refugee population, a dangerous venture given the IDF's shoot-to-kill policy. Palestinians remaining in Israel organised through the Israeli Communist Party, a continuation of the Palestinian Communist Party founded in 1923, while in the Jordan-controlled West Bank, Lebanon, Syria and the Gaza Strip, the refugees developed a civil society of charitable, women's, students' and workers' organisations. Israel's invasion of Gaza during the

Suez crisis in 1956, in which it sought alongside Britain and France to overthrow Egypt's president Nasser for a variety of sins including nationalising the Suez Canal, produced a core of Palestinian fighters with experience combatting the Israelis. They, including some who had participated in the Arab revolt of 1936–9, would form Fatah. The party's thinking was aligned with contemporary anticolonial movements. They read Fanon and studied the successful resistance to French colonialism by Algeria's FLN (to which Fanon belonged). While the old Arab leadership favoured subsuming Palestine into a general Arab nationalist campaign, Fatah favoured armed struggle with Israel. First Palestine, then the Middle East. This they backed up with a series of largely unsuccessful cross-border attacks. Through the sixties, organisations more influenced by Maoism and Guevarism, such as the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), emerged. Under Nasser's influence, Arab leaders agreed to form a Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) as a competitor to the grassroots organisations. The PLO, whose founding covenant declared that Israel was 'colonialist movement in its inception', would have its own army, but its leadership would be answerable to Nasser.[35]

The persistence of the Palestinians, though hardly a serious military threat, was a political threat and a major cause of Israeli wars in this era. The border raids from the Gaza Strip catalysed Israel's decision to participate in the thwarted Suez venture. The Six Day War in 1967, during which Israeli forces wiped out Egyptian, Syrian and Jordanian warplanes in a first strike before conquering much of the land that proponents of 'Greater Israel' hoped to annex, was partly driven by the Arab states' support for the Palestinian movement. Egypt's movement of troops to the Sinai, which prompted Israel's declaration of war, had itself been prompted by Israel's response to Palestinian guerrilla raids.[36]

Israeli military leaders were strikingly hard-headed about the situation. When Israeli kibbutznik Roi Rothberg was killed by Palestinian fighters on the Gaza border in 1956, the famous 'Arab fighter' Moshe Dayan, a partisan like Ben-Gurion of 'Greater Israel', delivered the eulogy: 'Let us not cast blame on the murderers today,' he said. 'For eight years they have been sitting in the refugee camps in Gaza, and before their eyes we have been transforming the lands and the villages, where they and their fathers dwelt, into our estate.' Given this, he warned against those 'yearning for peace', and urged Israelis to steel themselves for endless war. 'We are a

generation', he said, 'that settles the land and without the steel helmet and the cannon's maw, we will not be able to plant a tree and build a home.'[37]

IV.

For years, Israeli liberals have been warning about a fascist potential in the country's politics. Historian Zeev Sternhell insisted that perpetual conflict with the Palestinians would fertilise the ground for fascism.

Under a series of rightist governments led by Benjamin Netanyahu, far-right ministers attacked democratic rights hitherto enjoyed by Israelis. This began with relatively incremental measures, such as interfering in licensing regulations for commercial stations to benefit Netanyahu's backers, changing electoral procedures to disadvantage the Palestinian minority and proposing a new 'ethics code' for universities banning professors from stating their opinions in class or supporting the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement. In the ensuing years, it escalated into a blizzard of legislative offensives, formalising Israel's apartheid structure as a 'Jewish state', taxing donations from foreign governments (justified in part by the anti-Soros animus) and attacking the ability of the Supreme Court to strike down laws deemed unconstitutional. These measures had much in common with the constitutional rupture forced through by Hungary's Orbán under the rubric of 'national revolution' in 2012. In face of this the opposition decried what Labour leader Isaac Herzog called 'fascistization'.[38]

For many Israeli liberals and their Western counterparts, the seed of Israel's downfall can be traced to the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza. The traditional conception of radical-right politics in Israel, as Ami Pedahzur points out, focuses on support for territorial expansionism and settlements in 'Greater Israel'. So the millenarian settler movement represented by Gush Emunim that took root in those territories, motivated in Colin Shindler's words by a desire to 'recapture and re-establish locations of biblical remembrance', is considered the original source of the now powerful Israeli far right.[39]

That isn't entirely true, however. The fascist tendency in Zionist politics, Dan Tamir documents, can be traced to British Mandate Palestine. Peter Bergamin identifies a fascist tendency among the 'Maximalist' wing

of Revisionist Zionism in this era. More broadly, as Sara Yael Hirschhorn delicately puts it in her study of Jewish-American settlers, there had always been 'tensions between liberalism and Zionism'. This is partly because the 'Greater Israel' vision was already shared by Labour figures like Ben-Gurion and Dayan. But it is also because, greater or lesser, Israel was always conceived as an ethno-state.

Pedahzur's revised definition of the radical right to include nativism, he notes, clearly extends to one of the founding values of the State of Israel, namely the belief that those who live in Israel should 'belong to the 'Jewish ethnicity', even if they were not born in Israel'. As Pedahzur explains, nativism was 'prevalent among the commanding echelons of the Israeli Defence Force', in the kibbutz movement, and among Israeli leaders, from the earliest days of Israel's existence. It was institutionalised in the Law of Return enacted in 1950 that extended ethnic preference to Jewish migrants while Palestinian refugees were prevented from returning to their homes by the Law of Citizenship. This was further entrenched by martial law restricting the freedom of Palestinians in Israel, and Israel's policy of appropriating Palestinian land for Jewish settlement, formalised in the Israeli Lands Law of 1960. The thrust of post-war Israeli policy was 'ethnic democracy', an 'ideal habitat for the growth of … right-wing radicalism'.[40]

The Zionist movement has always been rent with contradictions, and decades of bloody struggle with the Palestinians have produced substantial strategic disagreements between its wings. There was, from the outset, dissent within the movement. Cultural Zionists like Martin Buber, Judah Magnes, Albert Einstein and Hannah Arendt rejected the idea that a 'Jewish homeland' should mean a 'Jewish state'. However, this faction was also characterised by ungrounded utopianism, casual chauvinism towards 'helplessly primitive' Palestinians, triumphalist assertions that Palestine's riches were 'exclusively the product of Jewish labour' and obliviousness as to the real consequences of Zionism's methods, which they claimed were 'far removed from those of conquest'.[41]

Among those who embrace the Jewish ethno-state, there have been differences in how they interpret their common commitments. The Zionist right, from Menachem Begin to Benjamin Netanyahu, from the religious right to the secular far right, is usually less willing to pragmatically cede territory than Labour or liberal Zionists. Opposition to the Oslo process, supposed to result in a two-state settlement, was most concentrated in the

Israeli radical right. Holding territory, not relinquishing it, is what they think secures peace: even if this is 'peace' in the Calgacian sense. However, given that the Zionist movement from left to right has always shared common ground in its commitment to ethnic nationalism, aspiration to territorial expansion and desire to break Palestinian resistance with an 'iron wall' of Jewish force, the question is why it should have started out under the dominance of an illusory 'socialism' and become a global outpost of the far right.[42]

The kernel of truth in the claims of Israeli liberals is that the crushing victory of 1967, which first solidified Israel's dependency on the United States, also detonated the messianic pyrotechnics of Zionist ideology. Labour Zionism responded to the territorial conquests in an ambiguous way, reflecting the conflict between expansion and ethnic cohesion. Ben-Gurion and Moshe Dayan favoured settlement, partly to prevent the emergence of a Palestinian state in the West Bank and Gaza. Others such as Abba Eban worried that the settlement drive would inevitably lead to apartheid and wreck the democratic foundation of the state. On the right, the new territories birthed Gush Emunim, which claimed that victory in 1967 and the ensuing settlement drive were divinely ordained. Many of its most violent members, Jacqueline Rose remarks, were 'highly trained officers and soldiers in reserve in the Israeli army'. At the same time, the ultra-nationalist founder of the Jewish Defence League, Meir Kahane, moved from New York to Israel in 1971 and launched a violent new far-right party, Kach. Despite its electoral weakness and eventual ban, it inspired Israel's first 'lone wolf' killer, Baruch Goldstein, who massacred twenty-nine Palestinian Muslim worshippers at the Ibrahimi Mosque in Hebron in 1994, and it educated future generations of far-right politicians such as Netanyahu's national security minister Itamar Ben-Gvir. Ben-Gvir's first date with his future wife included a romantic visit to Goldstein's grave.

A part of this change was the radicalisation of a layer of Jewish Americans to the right. As Hirschhorn's history of American settlers recounts, the majority had started their journey as liberal, Democrat voters, or as part of the American left, with 1967 catalysing the transition. This reflected what Peter Beinart describes as a profound 'shift from Jewish powerlessness' to relative 'Jewish power' that, coming so abruptly and following hard upon such a cataclysmic annihilation, had scarcely been assimilated and still coexisted with the perception of existential threat.[43]

In other ways, Israel's journey to the right resembles that of other countries. Its nationalist utopia had been sustained by a social-democratic state which, while fostering a domestic capitalist class, also supported Israeli welfare while suppressing the Palestinians and preparing for military expansion. When Israel experienced 'stagflation' in the mid-seventies like its counterparts in the West, the Israeli right blamed the 'socialism' of the founders for this malaise. This is a myth. As Zeev Sternhell documents, the founders always prioritised the national cause over any putative 'socialism'. But the myth motivated a transformation of the Israeli economy as it embraced neoliberalism and regional integration under the mantra of 'globalisation'. The resulting evisceration of the welfare state, collapse in union membership, electoral weakening of Labour Zionism and emergence of a powerful multinational capitalist class – many of its largest corporations foreign-owned – destroyed the foundations of traditional 'socialist' nationalism. In its place, the new far right embraced a more militantly exclusionary ethnic nationalism preoccupied, as Robert O. Paxton writes of fascism, 'with community decline, humiliation, or victimhood and by compensatory cults of energy, and purity'.[44]

V.

The first fatal blow to Labour Zionism had been dealt by the election of the first Likud government, led by former Irgun fighter Menachem Begin in 1977. The last hurrah of Labour Zionism, which had fully adapted to the neoliberal dispensation, was the Oslo peace process.

This process was not initiated by Israel, which had never acknowledged the existence of the Palestinians or their national rights. Rather, it was made possible by Fatah's progressive abandonment, from the mid-seventies, of one-state nationalism. In the aftermath of the Arab states' defeat in 1967, Fatah had taken over the PLO in alliance with other Palestinian parties. But its strategy of armed struggle made little impact, for Israel was not as vulnerable as other colonial regimes. Even before 1967, it had become 'truly an organ of the West, implanted in foreign soil'. As the exiled leadership grew pessimistic about the prospects for radical struggle in the occupied territories, it also suffered a comprehensive rout when Israel's invasion of Lebanon drove the PLO out of Beirut as a prelude to the 1982

massacre of refugees in Sabra and Shatila. By the time of the outbreak of the First Intifada in 1987, the PLO was already committed to suing for a two-state peace based on UN Resolution 242 giving the Palestinians 22 per cent of historic Palestine. The Palestinian left, though dissenting, remained loyal. Yitzhak Rabin, one of the last Israeli Labour Prime Ministers, was thus handed a unique opportunity to neutralise the Palestinian question on terms strongly favourable to Israel and lubricate its integration into the regional economy.[45]

The early results of Oslo were not promising for the Palestinians. According to UN Resolution 242, Israel was illegally occupying the West Bank and Gaza. Israel, however, remained committed to treating them as 'disputed territories', over which its 'rights' would not be prejudiced by negotiations. In the draft agreement, Israel continued to claim 'water rights' and access to roads in Gaza and the Jericho area for both civilians and soldiers. Crucially, it did not cede its 'powers and responsibilities' in the territories, particularly its responsibility for both internal and external security and its maintenance of 'public order' of the settlements. As Edward Said wrote,

> by accepting that land and sovereignty are being postponed till 'final status negotiations' the Palestinians in effect have discounted their unilateral and internationally acknowledged claim to the West Bank and Gaza: these have now at most become 'disputed territories'. Thus with Palestinian assistance Israel has been awarded at least an equal claim to them.

Eventually the PLO was ensconced in a para-state institution governing 30 per cent of the land in the West Bank and Gaza. Settlements expanded under Rabin and his successors, and Israeli forces retained the right to enter the West Bank at any time to pursue attackers, with no corresponding right for Palestinian forces.[46]

By the time of the final negotiations in Taba in 2001, under Israel's last Labour prime minister, Ehud Barak, Israel sought to annex 8 per cent of the West Bank behind its 'final border', while the Palestinian territory would be carved up into a series of Bantustans. Edward Said, who initially supported Oslo, wrote that such a 'state' would be 'weak, economically dependent on

Israel, without real sovereignty or power'. The Israeli historian Shlomo Ben-Ami wrote, before joining the Ehud Barak government, 'the Oslo agreements were founded on a neo-colonialist basis, on a life of dependence of one on the other forever'. This was a major diplomatic coup for Israel, and the high watermark of its client relationship with the United States. Yet, on the brink of success, Barak called off negotiations. This was most likely in recognition that in the upcoming election, Likud's Ariel Sharon, the butcher of Sabra and Shatila who had just sparked a Second Intifada with his controversial visit to the holy site of Temple Mount, was likely to win.[47]

Hamas was a major winner from Oslo. Starting as a social movement with its roots in the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood, it had emerged as a combat organisation during the Intifada in 1987. Hamas, like the Palestinian left, remained committed to the one-state nationalism that the PLO had abandoned, and it opposed Oslo from the start. However, while the parties of the left remained loyal to the PLO leadership, Hamas, benefiting from Hezbollah training in Lebanon, launched a series of attacks on Israel throughout the 1990s, gaining credibility among Palestinians as the settlements expanded and the talks sputtered to a tragicomic end. While it was far from alone in launching the disastrous campaign of suicide attacks on Israel during the Second Intifada – all the Palestinian organisations participated – it increasingly placed itself in the leadership.

As Ariel Sharon, under the canopy of the 'war on terror', razed the West Bank during Operation Defensive Shield, Fatah could do nothing to stop it. Positioning itself as the opposition to Fatah's unpopular leadership, Hamas contested and won partial municipal elections in 2005, and then the Palestinian legislative elections in 2006. Although Fatah accepted the outcome, the parties split over control of the security forces, for which the new Hamas interior minister was responsible. When President Mahmoud Abbas appointed a Fatah loyalist and Hamas responded by forming its own security force, a civil war erupted in which Hamas was driven out of the West Bank, with assistance from Israel and the United States. Hamas took control of the Gaza Strip, from which Israel had 'disengaged'.[48]

This confirmed the collapse of Oslo, and thus of Labour Zionism's final chance. Blaming Palestinians for its failure, it no longer had much distinctive to offer. The Palestinian movement was split, and the Palestinian Authority had no authority. Israel, under no pressure to negotiate, simply put Gaza under an intense siege and created *faits accomplis* with the growth

of settlements and outposts in the West Bank. The wave of Palestinian attacks in Israel had petered out by 2005, while the international solidarity movement that sprang up during Sharon's devastation of the West Bank in 2002 went into recession. And yet, despite its overweening strength, and amid the growing atmosphere of apocalyptic expectancy potentiated by the 'war on terror' with its dispensation of civilizational strife, Israel's victory never seemed total. It waged war on Lebanon in 2006 to little ultimate effect, the IDF being fought to a standstill by Hezbollah. Its repeated strikes on Gaza achieved little but destruction. As Palestinians were incarcerated in a besieged Gaza Strip and a repressive Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, younger generations of Israelis grew up relatively safer and more isolated from the Palestinians. They became much more right-wing than their parents and grandparents and hungered for a decisive win.

Israeli liberals, worried by the rise of the right as Netanyahu took power in 2009, tried to return to Zionism's roots and reinvigorate its traditional definition as shelter, 'security' and state provision for Israeli well-being. But this moment had already passed. Israel was the most unequal country in the OECD. Its public mood was deeply pessimistic. Support for a two-state settlement had dried up, approximately 80 per cent of Jewish Israelis favoured preferential treatment for Jews, most supported settlements, almost two-thirds claimed Israel was given to the Jews by God and about half supported the expulsion of all Palestinians from the territory ruled by Israel. Israeli Jews of all political persuasions had chosen perpetual war, with the messianic dimension of nationalism increasingly overt. As Naftali Bennett of the Jewish Home party observed, secularism was passé: Israel was a religious 'homeland', no longer a 'shelter'. The share of 'dati leumi', far-right religious Zionists among Israeli Jews had risen from 10 per cent to over a quarter, with the young overrepresented among them.[49]

The appetite for moral regeneration through war was boundless. Following its 'disengagement' from and subsequent blockade of the Gaza Strip, Israel launched a series of devastating offensives. Following the failed invasion of southern Lebanon in 2006, of which the only notable result was the 'Dahiya doctrine', Israel attacked Gaza during Operation Cast Lead (2008–9), Pillar of Cloud (2012), Protective Edge (2014) and twin attacks on the West Bank and Gaza in 2021. Each of these wars was supported by no less than 90 per cent of Jewish Israelis, and each was celebrated on the streets by a militant far right: 'There are no children left in

Gaza! … Gaza is a cemetery!' The public was often more bellicose than the government: in 2021, three-quarters of all Israelis opposed a ceasefire. Far-right ministers were included in every Israeli government after 2009 and used their profile to incite against Palestinians and 'aliens', contributing to the race riots in which Ethiopian migrants were assaulted in 2012.

Even as the secular and religious far-right vote splintered, coalesced and splintered again between parties such as Avigdor Lieberman's Yisrael Beiteinu, Naftali Bennet's Jewish Home, the Kahanist Jewish Power and the National Religious Party, the far right as a whole increased in clout. Hard-right parties like Likud, Shas and United Torah Judaism reacted to the far right's growth by adopting their themes. Every Netanyahu-led government since 2009 had far-right ministers, and the administration elected in November 2022 was the first to have Kahanist ministers, Itamar Ben-Gvir and Belazel Smotrich, both appointed to powerful ministries responsible for national security and the country's finances respectively.[50]

By 2022, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch and B'Tselem all agreed that Israel was an 'apartheid' regime. It was, said B'Tselem, a 'regime of Jewish supremacy from the Jordan river to the Mediterranean Sea'. Everyone who lived there was ruled by Israel, but only half had rights. The decisive moment for these organisations, long accustomed to documenting Israeli atrocities and abuses, was the passage of the 'nation state' law which defined Israel, in exclusionary terms, as the 'nation state of the Jewish people', and settlements as a 'national value' to be encouraged by the state. This established in law what had been the *de facto* reality since Israel's foundation. In the years since its passage, the Israeli supreme court upheld the law, while settlers and soldiers committed pogroms in the West Bank towns and villages of Huwara, Urif, Turmusaya, al-Baq'ah, Assira al-Qibliya, Beit Furik, Za'tara, the South Hebron Hills and Beita.[51]

Netanyahu knew what he was doing. While coalescing with the far right domestically, he also built bridges with far-right governments internationally, in India, Hungary, Romania, Brazil and, after 2016, the United States. He forged alliances with antisemitic politicians like Orbán and figures like Elon Musk, making him, according to *Ha'aretz*, 'the antisemites' cheerleader'. In so doing, however, he was exploiting the changing balance of global forces to expedite West Bank annexation and make a Palestinian state, at last, impossible.

The alliance with Donald Trump allowed Israel to declare Jerusalem the capital of Israel, though East Jerusalem was considered occupied under international law. Trump's 'deal of the century' for Israel foresaw no Palestinian state, nor any rights for refugees or those living in the West Bank and Gaza, only the offer of funding if Palestinians would acquiesce in turning the West Bank into an Israeli business park. The deal was widely derided as a 'surrender plan'. The Palestinian Authority could not accept it, but in practice it had already surrendered. Hamas, occupying the contradictory role of 'rebel government' in Gaza, was considered deterred. Netanyahu was even happy for Qatar to fund the Hamas administration, while the IDF periodically pulverised Gaza, as he reasoned that it would preserve the split between the West Bank and Gaza.

Israeli ambassador Danny Danon, giving diplomatic expression to this galvanic will to power, trollingly queried in the *New York Times*: 'What's wrong with Palestinian surrender?'[52] On 7 October 2023, he got his answer.

VI.

On 29 December 2023, after almost three months of merciless destruction, Israel was hit with a legal bombshell as South Africa applied to begin proceedings against Israel at the International Court of Justice (ICJ). Using a procedure that had previously been used successfully by the Gambia to intervene in Myanmar's genocide against the Rohingya, it cited its obligation as a party to the Genocide Convention to prevent genocide. It also requested that the court order 'provisional measures' to stop the genocide, including calling for an end to Israel's military action.

The basis of South Africa's argument was that Israeli leaders had expressed genocidal intent, and that this was reflected in practice on the ground. The unprecedented pace of civilian killing; high share of women and children among the dead; assault on life support systems such as medicine, water, fuel and food; and demolition of institutions of national life and culture such as universities, schools and mosques all conveyed an 'intent to destroy'. The behaviour of soldiers who referenced Netanyahu's 'Amalek' speech while celebrating their own genocidal intentions showed that official incitements were understood and followed through on the ground.[53]

In a powerful, widely praised closing argument for the prosecution, lawyer Blinne Ní Ghrálaigh said:

> On the basis of the current figures, on average 247 Palestinians are being killed and are at risk of being killed each day, many of them literally blown to pieces. They include 48 mothers each day, two every hour and over 117 children each day, leaving UNICEF to call Israel's actions a war on children.
>
> On current rates, which show no sign of abating, each day over 3 medics, 2 teachers, more than one UN employee and more than one journalist will be killed, many while at work or in what appeared to be targeted attacks on their family homes or where they are sheltered.
>
> The risk of famine will increase each day. Each day, an average of 629 people will be wounded, some multiple times over as they move from place to place desperately seeking sanctuary.
>
> Each day over 10 Palestinian children will have one or both legs amputated, many without anaesthetic. Each day, on current rates, an average 3900 Palestinian homes will be damaged or destroyed, more mass graves will be dug, more cemeteries will be bulldozed and bombed, denying even the dead any dignity or peace.[54]

According to Omer Bartov, South Africa had brought a 'powerful', 'strong case' against Israel.[55] One would have been hard-pressed to understand just how difficult this case was for Israel if one relied on anglophone news. In the UK, while Israel's defence was livestreamed, South Africa's prosecution was described in broad-brush terms and not broadcast. Israel's defence, designed more for the newsroom than for the courtroom, started from the polemical assertion that South Africa had become the legal representative of Hamas. It then argued that Hamas rather than Israel had chosen this war, that the expulsion orders were intended to spare Palestinian lives (even though Israel repeatedly bombed supposed 'safe' spaces), that they could not be blamed if Hamas hid its fighters among civilians, and that the statements conveying genocidal intent were not intended as such. None of this was a satisfactory legal defence against the charge of genocide, but it was consistent with Israeli media messaging. Israel's most important defence claim was that South Africa did not have a real dispute with Israel

over its breaches to the Genocide Convention, and thus it asked the court to throw out South Africa's case.[56]

However, as the ICJ prepared to hear the case, Israeli ministers continually vaunted their aim of destroying Gaza and disposing of the Palestinian population. Ambassador Hotovely, asked on LBC radio if she was making an argument 'for destroying the whole of Gaza, every single building in it', coldly replied: 'Do you have another solution?' As the court was deliberating, foreign minister Israel Katz told the EU that Palestinians should be housed on an artificial island in the Mediterranean. Meanwhile Netanyahu let it be known that Israel would not desist in its assault even if the ICJ ruled against it.[57]

On 26 January 2024, Israel suffered a humiliating preliminary legal defeat. The court, in a ruling read out by Joan Donoghue, a former State Department legal advisor under Hillary Clinton, rejected Israel's defence and accepted that South Africa had a right to bring the prosecution. It accepted that the acts 'committed by Israel' appeared 'to be capable of falling' within the provisions of the Genocide Convention. It enumerated Israeli statements expressing genocidal intent, acts of incitement and attacks on Palestinians as a group. It identified an 'urgency', a 'real and imminent risk' of 'irreparable' harm being done to the Palestinians before the trial was concluded. It ordered Israel to prevent its military from committing acts of genocide, to allow humanitarian aid into the Gaza Strip and to punish incitement to genocide. Israel was given a month to report back on the measures taken.[58] Although the court did not specifically call for a ceasefire, it was difficult to see how the orders could be obeyed while continuing the war.

This was a historic moment: Israel was going to be prosecuted for the crime of genocide. 'For the first time in seventy-five years,' Mustafa Barghouti of the Palestinian National Initiative explained, 'Israel is stripped of its impunity.' The judgment flew in the face of Israeli assertions that the case was a 'blood libel'. It lampooned Western statements calling the prosecution 'unfounded' (US State Department spokesperson John Kirby) or 'completely unjustified' (UK prime minister Rishi Sunak) and laid them open to the charge of complicity in genocide. And it reduced to ignominious self-satire the sanctimony of media outlets which ignorantly dismissed South Africa's case as, in the *Economist*'s phrase, 'flimsy'.

Some of Israel's allies tried to spin this as a win for Israel, or at least downplay the decision's severity. The US State Department claimed that the court's decision was 'consistent' with America's position that Israel had a right to act in accordance with international law, noting that 'the court did not make a finding about genocide or call for a ceasefire'. State Department spokesperson John Kirby also emphasised that the court had not found 'Israel guilty of genocide', though defendants are typically not convicted upon arraignment. American newspapers highlighted the absence of a specific ceasefire demand, while *Sky News*'s security analyst argued that the court was only saying 'what Israel's allies are saying'. All of which, however illogical, would have been the intelligent PR move for Israel. Israeli officials, however, would not hear of it. Netanyahu accused the court of antisemitism. Gallant fumed that Israel did 'not need to be lectured on morality', and that the ICJ had gone 'above and beyond' in granting South Africa's 'antisemitic request' to prosecute Israel. Ben-Gvir simply stated: 'Hague Schmague.'[59]

Once again, Israel was high on its hypertrophic sense of victimhood even as it killed. Every criticism of Israel could be blamed on the insidious influence of Hamas, who were Nazis. It had, however, chosen this disgrace, with overwhelming military, political and diplomatic support. Having at no point specified a plausible end goal for its war, or a realistic scenario for the day after the war, much less any meaningful solution to end its war with the Palestinians, it yielded to its most hallucinatory messianic impulses. Western governments, ignoring the nature of the regime they were allying with, have repeatedly enabled, justified and provided cover for Israel's palingenetic ultra-nationalist violence.

Even as the ICJ warned of an imminent danger of genocide against the Palestinians, the United States and its allies announced that they were withdrawing funding from UNRWA, one of the few remaining sources of food and medicine in Gaza, based on as yet unsubstantiated allegations emanating from the Israeli Shin Bet's interrogation of suspects that a handful of the organisations' employees were possibly involved in the 7 October attacks. Israel's allies, far from flinching at the court's warning, are doubling down on genocide. With unbelievable hypocrisy, they also protest their sympathy for Palestinian civilians and even, in the State Department's words, claim to 'grieve with' the people they are helping to destroy.[60]

It is tempting to say that the rise of apocalyptic far-right nationalism in Israel and its increasingly open embrace of genocidal violence while shielding itself by appropriating Holocaust memory represent a familiar historical inversion. Edward Said famously described the Palestinians as 'the victims of the victims', while Mahmoud Mamdani's work on the Rwandan genocide shows us that there is nothing terribly surprising about victims becoming killers.[61] Yet Mamdani's insight concerns the way in which a victimised population turns on its erstwhile oppressors. And while that might partly explain the vengeful furies sometimes unleashed by anticolonial movements such as the FLN in Algeria, or by Palestinian militias against Israeli civilians on 7 October 2023, it doesn't quite grasp what has happened in Israel. For, insofar as the founders of Israel were victims of European antisemitism, they were already becoming killers when they decided to colonise Palestine. And there is a wealth of historical work now supporting the intuition of anti-colonial movements that the stimulus for fascism in its original appearance was colonisation and its pioneering of racial dictatorship and genocide. The first genocide of the twentieth century, shaping what was to come, was after all the pitiless German destruction of the Herero in today's Namibia.[62]

Aimé Césaire, the Martinican poet and anti-colonial rebel, unforgettably described the dynamic in his *Discourse on Colonialism*:

> First we must study how colonization works to decivilize the colonizer, to brutalize him in the true sense of the word, to degrade him, to awaken him to buried instincts, to covetousness, violence, race hatred, and moral relativism; and we must show that each time a head is cut off or an eye put out in Vietnam and in France they accept the fact, each time a little girl is raped and in France they accept the fact, each time a Madagascan is tortured and in France they accept the fact, civilization acquires another dead weight, a universal regression takes place, a gangrene sets in, a centre of infection begins to spread; and that at the end of all these treaties that have been violated, all these lies that have been propagated, all these punitive expeditions that have been tolerated, all these prisoners who have been tied up and 'interrogated', all these patriots who have been tortured, at the end of all the racial pride that has been encouraged, all the boastfulness that has been

> displayed, a poison has been distilled into the veins of Europe and, slowly but surely, the continent proceeds towards savagery.[63]

We proceed towards savagery today in different conditions. The genocides of the colonial era were genocides of what Karl Marx would call ‘formal subsumption’. They were carried out by newly industrial capitalist states, seeking an outlet for surplus populations and surplus capital, and using violence to either coerce troublesome populations into accepting their role as exploitable labour or eliminate them.[64]

Today’s genocides, against the Rohingya in Myanmar, against Gazans, and incipiently against Muslims in India, usually occur in the context of forms of ethnic nationalism fuelled by muscular capitalist paths of growth in modern economies. The dysfunctions of this political economy, its failure to provide an adequate basis for the nationalist utopia of a perfect congruence between the people and the state, are expediently metabolised through the orchestration of violence against scapegoat populations. Forging moral borders with steel and blood, they enable a dimly utopian vision to be reconstructed around a purified vision of the people-nation. A vision so unrealisably remote that the desire it expresses can never be satiated and can never stop short of disaster.

Conclusion: Dark Climate

It's too easy to be antifascist on the molar level, and not even see the fascist inside you, the fascist you yourself sustain and nourish and cherish with molecules both personal and collective.[1]
— Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*

I.

Fascism, Robert O. Paxton writes in his authoritative history, becomes an historical force when it addresses 'a sense of overwhelming crisis beyond the reach of any traditional solutions'. The paradox in this book has been that, where real crises abound, disaster nationalism is enthralled by entirely fictional crises. And, inasmuch as it presents itself as a solution, it is also palpably hankering for a world-shattering, cleansing crisis: bring it on. This disaster fiction, I have suggested, is a kind of dreamwork enacted on the real crises of the age, conducting the molecular flow of economic, emotional and erotic miseries into a building tidal wave of vengeful violence.[2]

This is not yet fascism, or not-yet-fascism. Disaster nationalism is certainly stuffed with fantasies of a military dictatorship against the left: thus QAnon and the 'Stop the Steal' activists urging on military rule with Trump as president for life; thus the Brazilian protesters begging the military to 'save' Brazil from communism. It gets high on its trolling references to historical fascism, as in Brazilian secretary of culture Roberto Alvim delivering a speech on cultural policy that almost precisely mimicked lines from a Goebbels speech published in a recent biography, or in Sarah Palin's teasing reference to the 'fourteen words' used by white nationalists. It has launched a series of fumbled, half-hearted, inept 'insurrections', which can be seen as dress rehearsals for the big day. In its ideology, it often looks exactly like the 'palingenetic ultranationalism' that

Roger Griffin describes as the ideational nucleus of fascism. Yet fascism is more than its ideology: it is, as Andreas Malm and the Zetkin Collective put it, a 'real historical force'. A force tending towards civilizational suicide that only discloses itself in full when it has power.[3]

The crises afflicting us, at the molecular level of social relations as much as at the molar level of capitalist dysfunction, parliamentary paralysis and the cumulative defeats of trade unionism and the left which in the past paved the fascist rise to power, have not yet reached such a pitch. Nor has the new far right achieved the degree of ideological clarity and self-organisation that would make it capable of overthrowing parliamentary democracies. Yet there is, working upon all the aforementioned crises, a catalyst, a force multiplier testing the very energetic foundations of contemporary civilization, known as the climate crisis. And extant developments already suggest, potentiating existing vectors of disaster nationalist contagion, it is primed to produce further explosions.

In 2021, in a village on a bank of the Brahmaputra River in the Indian state of Assam, a murder was recorded on video. The government was evicting Bengali Muslims from their homes, 5,000 of which were destroyed, to give to 'indigenous' Assamese Hindus. A boy, Moinul Hoque, charged at armed police in blind fury at their destruction; they shot him at point-blank range, and then proceeded to beat his dying body with batons. Accompanying the police team was a Hindu photographer, Bijoy Baniya. As the batons fell, Baniya took a running victory leap and planted one foot on the dying boy's chest. In a report for *Time*, Debashish Roy Chowdhury commented, 'Stomping on a Muslim corpse now has a gloss of patriotic righteousness to it … policemen are seen hugging him in the video after Hoque's death.'[4]

There was, in addition to the incitements of Hindu supremacists, another dark subtext to the murder. One of the main reasons for the migration of Bengali Muslims to Assam in recent years has been the wave of climate change–induced disasters, such as floods disrupting the ecology of the Ganges Delta. This has, for decades, resulted in sustained conflict as Hindu Assamese attacked Bangladeshi Muslims, resulting in over thirty thousand deaths between 1991 and 2008.[5] Murderous nationalism has been thriving on climate breakdown for at least that long.

The ecological despoliation of the planet does not, by itself, generate social conflict. Still less does it spawn ideologies of palingenetic

nationalism or its accompanying vengeful passions. Rather, it creates structural conditions for crisis, while catalysing existing bellogenic conditions such as relative scarcities, unequal vulnerabilities, increased production costs, and violent exploitation. Take climate refugees, for example. According to the UNHCR, 21 million people have been displaced by climate annually since 2008. By 2050, it is projected that 1.2 billion people will be displaced by climate change and natural disasters. Millions of these refugees already end up in debt bondage or forms of modern slavery simply because their position as refugees and the low status and protections they are given makes them more vulnerable to exploitation, so that an increase in their number due to climate crisis is likely to stretch further both the resources and the negligible welcome available to them. Climate change will also compound the existing risks associated with travelling to a safe country. For example, migrants and asylum seekers trying to reach the US border through Mexico must now go through the Sonoran Desert to avoid America's mesh of border patrols and fortified crossings. This already dangerous journey through an extremely hot environment is killing 350 people a year. As temperatures rise, the number dying from organ failure and dehydration is also likely to increase. An increasing number of climate refugees, it seems likely, will also intensify nationalist pressure for more violent border regimes, making the journey even more dangerous.[6]

A flow of refugees is not, though, enough to create a 'refugee crisis' or cause a violent backlash, any more than wildfires caused the hunt for antifa in rural Oregon. As historian Dan Stone points out, the recent idea of a 'refugee crisis' in Europe appears to be a purely 'rhetorical construct': while 'countries like Lebanon and Jordan have each taken in over one million Syrian refugees, European countries are apparently unable to cope with tens of thousands'. The flows only become 'unmanageable' from the point of view of states already committed to keeping refugees out, as in the efforts of 'Fortress Europe' to shut down every legal means of travel, causing refugees to undertake risky boat journeys in which hundreds die in the Mediterranean each year. And while politicians euphemistically blame 'traffickers' for a situation they have created – in 2015, it was even suggested that they might 'bomb' the traffickers – in practice they affirm the predicate of disaster nationalism that refugees are undeserving human refuse. In Modi's India, similarly, it is only because problems of distribution

and entitlement have for decades been solved in an ethnic manner, to the benefit of Hindus, that the settlement of Bengali climate refugees in Assam is an occasion for murderous nationalism.[7] A disordered ecology would not transform itself into either 'fossil fascism' or 'eco-fascism' were such potentials not already circulating in parliamentary regimes.

If interwar fascism thrived on a crisis of democracy exploding from the volcanic mouth of raging class civil wars and decadent imperialism, disaster nationalism is already beginning to insinuate itself into a more intractable climate crisis threatening the energetic infrastructure of modern civilization. For the present, disaster nationalism's commitment to muscular national capitalism requires that it repudiate climate change as a 'globalist' lie victimising freedom-loving motorists. It has taken over a denialist apparatus built and later abandoned by fossil capital, and to its traditionally pro-capitalist ideology added the animating idea of racial threat: climate change is a scam that transfers wealth to Chinese communism, says Trump, or a plot to hand over the loot of the 'producers' to the 'moochers', says Pamela Geller. 'Enviro-Communism', as Breivik's manifesto put it, means a 'transfer of resources … from the developed Western world to the third world'. In defiance of all the crybabies and snowflakes who are 'ruining it', they give technological expression to their wishes for omnipotence: 'Drill, baby, drill!'

Already, however, there are green-nationalist and eco-fascist tendencies abroad, reflected in Marine Le Pen's assertion that migrants are 'nomads' who have no 'homeland' and no care for the environment, in the alt-right contempt for profiteering 'Jewish Unnatur', and in the 'lone wolf' manifestoes of Payton Gendron, Brenton Tarrant and Patrick Crusius connecting fears of overpopulation to 'the Great Replacement' and 'white genocide'. These claims rehearse the idea already present in nineteenth-century ecology, and reprised in the ecological thinking of Ernst Haeckel, Ludwig Klages, Savitri Devi, Jorian Jenks, Alain de Benoist, Renaud Camus, Garrett Hardin, Hervé Juvin, Björn Höcke and Dave Foreman, that environmentalism means a social Darwinist war on out-of-place or superfluous biology.[8]

II.

If ecological ruin redounds to the benefit of fascism one way or another, this raises serious questions about democracy. Or to be irritatingly precise, capitalist democracy.

After all, capitalist democracy is an inherently contradictory and unstable formation, in which each half of the chimera operates on entirely different principles. In the post-war world, it stabilised itself where it did with the promise of limitless growth as an alternative to an equality it could not possibly deliver. Endless growth, though a contradiction in terms, became a secular religion. Ecological crisis now forces a crisis of faith. And while ecological thought has always harboured scepticism about democracy, from Garret Hardin's 'Tragedy of the Commons' to William Ophuls's 'Leviathan or Oblivion?', capitalist democracy now worries its allies. The common argument is that it fails because of electoral short-termism, or voter self-interest. However tendentious such claims are, in their strenuous refusal to mention the capitalist half of the chimera which has been driving the climate crisis, they at least apprehend the limit that is being reached.[9]

And at that limit, the question is whether democracy as it exists is stable enough to withstand the enormous stresses that climate change will place on its material foundations. For democracy, globally, is in a precarious state. In a 2022 report by the Stockholm-based International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, it was found that half of the world's democracies had seen dysfunction, institutional paralysis and an erosion of civil liberties in the last five years. Already the representative institutions have been 'hollowing out' as Peter Mair puts it, while the state tilts in a more authoritarian and exclusionary direction. In this situation, the faith in democratic ideas has been receding, with the number of people in Europe and North America who think it 'essential' to live in a democracy falling well below 50 per cent among younger generations.[10]

It is curious, then, that disaster nationalism does not speak ill of democracy. To the contrary, it claims to be more democratic than its opponents. When Modi was challenged at a White House press conference over the persecution of Muslims in India, he expostulated, 'Democracy is in our blood.' Donald Trump, campaigning in 2023, claimed to be on the side of democratic renewal: 'I don't consider us to have much of a democracy right now.' Marine Le Pen, in her 2022 presidential campaign, contrasted herself with the arrogantly 'Jupiterian' Macron, saying, 'I count on

consulting the only expert that Emmanuel Macron never consulted – the people.' In Israel, the far-right protests against the constraints imposed on executive power by the Supreme Court, chanting 'the people are sovereign'. Surveys published in 2018 found that the centrists, not the far right, were the most likely to express scepticism about democracy.[11] Is this merely cynical? Is the far right, in claiming the mantle of a democracy it has always existed to destroy, simply exploiting the collapsing democratic legitimacy of the centre? If so, why has no disaster nationalist government sought, barring Trump's botched 'soft coup', to overturn democracy? Why does it rather revel in its majoritarian claims? If, as Dylan Riley has claimed, fascism can be defined as 'authoritarian democracy' (though it is hard to see the *demos* as actually ruling under fascism), is disaster nationalism content with merely ratcheting up the authoritarianism?[12]

The alarming answer might be, as Nikhil Pal Singh suggests in an essay on the 'afterlife' of fascism, that fascism is the 'doppelgänger or double' of liberal democracy, reflecting 'an exclusionary will to power that has regularly reemerged'. Michael Mann has documented this 'dark side of democracy' in relation to the phenomenon of ethnic cleansing. Unstable democracies are susceptible to brutal torsions wherein the *demos* is conflated with the *ethnos*. In crisis conditions, features of democracy lend themselves to ethno-nationalist fury, in which class-like antagonism is transposed into zero-sum ethnic struggle. The furies of war still contain genocidal potential, in the form of what Martin Shaw calls 'degenerate war', in which the category of the civilian is progressively obliterated (as it has been recently in Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine and in Obama's drone wars). But, Mann documents, the civil war for which disaster nationalists hanker is now more murderous than interstate war.[13]

It would be Pollyanna-ish to assume that our currently fraught democratic systems, susceptible as they manifestly are to being gamed by far-right upstarts, will prove stable enough to ride out the coming climate storms. Disaster nationalism is already latently preoccupied with the metaphysical concerns of fascism in either its accelerationist-capitalist or traditionalist idioms, regarding the inevitability and desirability of war, the impossibility of universality and the idea of destiny linked to a people defined in occult naturalist, vitalist or spiritual terms – all, as Chetan Bhatt writes, logically progressing 'towards cleansing violence'.[14] But it has not yet, with the exception of Hindu nationalism, summoned mass consent on

that basis. The danger is that as faith in the possibility of democracy erodes from within and frays at the edges, a pessimistic fascist metaphysics will find its purchase, offering supremacy as a solution to the melancholia of loss and decline. What comes next will depend on reinvigorating democracy in other ways and by other means than simply shoring up faith in a failing system.

III.

We cannot disown apocalyptic desire. Movements for change, from abolitionism to Extinction Rebellion, thrive on the horizon of the imminent end, which is either the catastrophe or the jubilee in which all debts are forgiven, all injustices cancelled, all peoples freed. This is a point that the hope-scolds miss when they caution against 'doom-mongering', fearing that it will demotivate the constituency for change. There is certainly, as Walter Benjamin warned, dubious enjoyment in consuming evidence of our catastrophes as commodity images. Yet there is also a latent rebelliousness in even the bluntest expressions of hopelessness, as when Extinction Rebellion unfurled a banner simply saying: 'We're Fucked'.

This dialectic of disasters was most poignantly expressed by Rosa Luxemburg, whose analysis of capitalist crisis, imperialism and nationalism profoundly influenced Hannah Arendt's analysis of totalitarianism. Her insight is often boiled down to the phrase she borrowed from Engels: 'socialism or barbarism'. In fact, it might be better expressed as socialism *and* barbarism. As Enzo Traverso puts it, Marxism counters simple Enlightenment visions of progress with a dialectical conception of 'catastrophe and progress, oppression and liberation' in the same moment, as capitalism transforms 'all technical and scientific progress into social regression'.[15]

For Luxemburg, the unique contribution of Marxism, compared to parliamentary socialism, was 'the concept of a breakdown, of a social catastrophe … a cataclysm', 'a general and catastrophic crisis', in which the accumulating crises of the capitalist system lead 'inevitably to its ruin'. In *The Accumulation of Capital*, Luxemburg argued that the objective arguments for socialism depended on this inevitable collapse. In essence, since capitalism would always produce more than could profitably be

consumed, it could only sustain itself by finding new peripheries to exploit: hence colonial competition, the scramble for Africa and the drive to war in Europe. Writing amid the ruins of the First World War, she wrote that capitalism, having destroyed the 'natural economy' of colonised countries, 'brings catastrophe as a mode of existence back from the periphery of capitalist development to its point of departure'. The *Junius* pamphlet, her plangent cry of despair at the capitulation of Europe's Marxist parties to a war in which workers thrust steel into the guts of other workers, warned that if humanity did not save itself with socialist revolution, barbarism would entail 'the destruction of culture and, as in Ancient Rome, depopulation, desolation, degeneration, a vast cemetery'.[16]

Luxemburg, almost driven to suicide by the war, lived to briefly see the redemption she sought, becoming a leader of a new, anti-war revolutionary left. 'The whole road of socialism', she wrote in one of her last essays before she was tortured to death by far-right Freikorps under orders from her former comrades in the Social Democratic Party, and her body dumped in the Landwehr Canal, 'is paved with nothing but thunderous defeats. Yet at the same time, history marches inexorably, step by step, towards final victory! Where would we be today without those "defeats", from which we draw historical experience, understanding, power and idealism?'[17]

There was, however, nothing 'inevitable' about progress in this bloody, tragic and improbable historical dialectic. In the detail of Luxemburg's analysis, capitalism was a vast, expanding and collapsing mechanism that, left to its own devices, could only inevitably bring barbarism. Survival depended on the self-confidence, self-consciousness and self-organisation of a mass working-class movement, which was by no means inevitable. And her analysis of capitalist collapse was if anything too optimistic. As David Harvey explains, the gap between goods produced and effective consumer demand 'can easily be covered by reinvestment which generates its own demand'.[18] The real crisis came when opportunities for profitable investment were no longer abundant, so that there was an overaccumulation of capital rather than an underconsumption of goods. At that point, though, severe crises such as recessions, wars and ecological breakdown, however catastrophic for humanity, would usefully destroy surplus capital. The game, through a violent reset, could begin again: capitalism would thrive on its disasters.

Of which disaster nationalism, commuting vaguely rebellious or dissident impulses into support for muscular national capitalism and ethnic revenge, while also thriving on the commodification of these desires as grifters churn out merch and bestselling books, is an exemplary case.

IV.

How might we begin to disrupt the molecular flow of disaster nationalism and arrest its channelling of dissent into consent for violent authoritarianism? On the immediate, tactical level, disaster nationalism is a mass of contradictions and limits.

For example, the new far right's occasional workerist idiom is, as we have seen, incredibly thin. Faced with collective action, as in recent American auto worker strikes or the French strikes against pension reform, it makes cautious efforts to associate itself with revolt, but otherwise has nothing solvent to say and in most cases is on the other side. This fact might fruitfully be rammed home to everyone who strikes or supports a strike. Disaster nationalism is also, like fascism, prone to grave miscalculation and overreach because of its extreme voluntarism and mythopoeic comprehension of the enemy it faces. This gives its opponents the interval in which to intervene and disrupt its molecular flows. The recession of the armed right in the United States following the 'insurrection' is such an opportunity.

In most cases, excepting India, a major weakness for the new far right is that its projection of political influence far exceeds its real social depth. Its growth has been built by exploiting the crisis of the mainstream parties, winning funding from capitalist outliers, gaining backing from rightist media oligarchs and gaming surges of attention by manipulating both legacy media and the social industry. Its street mobilising, while violent and dangerous to anyone on the sharp end, is yet sporadic and insufficient to sustain the far right over long periods of political struggle. In all these respects, disaster nationalism is hostage to events.

Then there are the various disjunctures that appear within disaster nationalism as it assembles novel electoral and social coalitions. For example, there is a tension between the prevailing sociophobic individualism with its 'libertarian' accents, and its radically authoritarian,

statist and sometimes theocratic aspirations, which can cause problems for the assault on civil and human rights. The US Supreme Court revocation of abortion rights, for example, appears to have cost Republicans in the United States dearly. There is also an outright contradiction between the muscular capitalism of contemporary nationalist politics and the wayward anti-capitalist feelings that it tries to capture with its racially coded anti-globalism or anti-elitism.

On climate politics, the rift between denialism and eco-fascism is likely to become more consequential. The commitment to denialism is proving untenable, and it has for now prevented the far right from having any chance of fighting for influence within the climate movement. In its sexual stramashes, it encompasses the extremes of moral panic and entitled sexual aggression, is both performatively swaggering and performatively puritanical, defending 'women' (against trans women) one minute and reviling them the next, triumphalist and whining, traditionalist and edgily modern. The fact that Milo Yiannopoulos was cancelled by his own side for appearing to defend sex between an adult and an underage boy, while Andrew Tate appears to have suffered no equivalent fall from disgrace when accused of sex trafficking, is indicative of the tensions here. The only thing that really coheres its critique of sexual modernity is its hostility to social changes that threaten the status of the white bourgeois male: a narrow constituency. Any one of these tensions is likely, under sufficient pressure, to become a schism.

However, this only raises the question of what kind of pressure, guided by what kind of strategy. To read incipient fascism as political dreamwork, as I have, doesn't mean that we can psychoanalyse it into oblivion. But it may appear to imply some sort of *therapeutic* solution, perhaps like that adopted by Marx towards religion. As Marx put it in his *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, to demand the abolition of religion as 'the *illusory* happiness of the people' is to demand 'their *real* happiness'.[19] The task, rather than merely coldly disillusioning an oppressed and heartbroken people, was to abolish the conditions that necessitated illusions. A crude translation of this in the struggle against inchoate fascism would be 'bread-and-butter' politics. This would mean advancing political demands for such goods as higher wages and housing that gain easy assent across the divide, fulfilment of which would begin to

solve our chronic dysfunctions, provide real security and drain the swamp of fascist desire.

That is not exactly what I propose. We cannot hope to bypass the explosive psychological power of disaster nationalism or the requirement to confront its potpourri of apocalyptic ideas by offering its subjects material comfort. We would be the ones trying to administer opiates to the people if that were the extent of our strategy. I am not suggesting that bread-and-butter politics is superfluous. It will help. We do need bread and butter. We even like it. But we don't *love* it. And the things we do love often don't give us any material benefit whatever. You might love your children, for example, but it isn't because they increase your income and free time. The ideas that people love, and hold dear, are often ideas for which they are prepared to sacrifice a great deal. And experience shows that, given the choice between material well-being and the opportunity to make a sacrifice for a cause that may finally win, people often choose the latter. As Tad DeLay puts it, reflecting on a seriously ill friend who was kept alive by government-insured healthcare that he nonetheless continued to insist should be abolished: 'People enjoy wins, even if they shall surely die.'[20] Is this even surprising? We are, just as Marx insisted, creatures of passion.

To comprehend passion as an historical force, we need to take a brief detour through an aspect of Marx's method. The essence of Marx's approach to the criticism of religion was not the suggestion that religious ideas are 'illusions' – how could anyone possibly know that? – but the imperative to investigate and change the 'material conditions' in which ideas and intentions are formed. As Marx puts it in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, 'social being' determines 'consciousness'. What are these 'material conditions'? What is 'social being'? It seems obvious that we're talking about the human body, its frailties, dependencies and ultimate finitude. We're talking about the need to eat and the inevitability of death.

Yet it doesn't stop there. For Marx, 'social being' refers to all the social relationships into which we enter, whether as workers, wives, borrowers, lenders, soldiers, celebrities or whatever, in the hope of securing our livelihood. But what is a social relationship? It is 'something *immaterial*' as Marx puts it in the *Grundrisse*, a conscious process that superintends the flows of matter and energy in a society. So the material conditions include the immaterial. As Engels put it, 'nothing happens' in history 'without a

conscious purpose or an intended aim'. Consciousness, the intentional stretching towards reality (etymologically, 'intend' means to 'stretch towards'), is one of the motor forces of historical development.[21]

Why, if our material reproduction is governed by immaterial conscious processes, isn't it enough to change our will? As we've seen, disaster nationalism is susceptible to this kind of pure voluntarism, but experience shows that it doesn't work. Because our intentions are not just limited by the material possibilities that confront us, but also collectively mediated through relationships, institutions, laws and ideologies whose outcomes often defy or limit our intentions. Engels again: 'That which is willed happens but rarely … the numerous desired ends cross and conflict with one another, or these ends are themselves from the outset incapable of realization, or the means of attaining them are insufficient.' The resulting process almost appears like a calamity of accidents but, in the longer view, events appear to be 'governed by inner, hidden laws'.[22] History thus seems to possess, however weakly and messily, an immanent rationality. A rationality that, in the grand scheme of things according to Marx and Engels, through all its terrifying violence and depravity, bends towards the growing self-consciousness of the species, the growing universality of its needs, and thus towards freedom. To act efficaciously in history is thus to discern and work on these occluded rhythms and contradictions.

Where the passions come into this historical development is through the theory of need. As Marx puts it in *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*: 'the rich' human being is simultaneously 'in need of a totality of vital human expression'. The richer and more developed we become, the more complex our needs become. Our needs are not just for whatever toys or utilities can be bought for money: that would be only a 'one-sided' body of needs cultivated by markets. Rather, they include a more opulent and various realm of possible satisfactions, such as the need for other people in 'communal activity and communal enjoyment', and even the development of 'radical needs' such as 'the need for universality'. These are all historical needs, in the sense that they are not purely biological but come about through the phases of development in human societies. It is, for example, through workers' associations in trade unions that, beginning with the need to improve their income, they acquire the need for one another. In *The Poverty of Philosophy*, Marx describes English economists 'amazed to see the workers sacrifice a good part of their wages in favour of associations,

which, in the eyes of these economists, are established solely in favour of wages'. Mike Davis, in his history of socialist organising, describes the 'collective moral transcendence' arising from prolonged strikes, especially where they expand to include whole communities.[23]

Could this have some bearing on the fact that union members tend to be resistant to the disaster nationalist serenade, that the rise of far-right politics closely tracks the declining depth of union membership and frequency of strikes, and that the workers who do vote for any kind of right-wing party tend to be non-union and work for small businesses? I am not raising unionisation as a shibboleth, as though we just need to 'rebuild the unions' in order to defeat the new far right. It was, for example, dock workers who struck in support of Enoch Powell. In the United States, roughly 40 per cent of union households supported Trump in both 2016 and 2020. In Danish unions today, there is a growing margin of support for far-right politicians. Much depends not only on how effective unions are in resisting trends towards the precaritisation of work and supporting collective living standards, but also in whether they act as mere service providers or as what Richard Stöss calls a 'community of values'.[24]

I merely mean to point out that it is in the forms of life, established in this case through the eros of collective action, that the passions are formed. Among the few expressions of collective life that we have been permitted in the neoliberal era, however, aside from the consumerist arcades, have been enthralling spectacles of national belonging, from football stadiums to Olympics events. And these are spectacles, Freud saw, that arouse collective narcissism. In *Mass Psychology and the Analysis of the 'I'* (1922), Freud argued that in such collectives 'the individual is willing to "surrender" his ego-ideal' and exchange it for a 'mass ideal' that might be embodied in a leader, flag or symbol. This can turn dark very quickly, as evidenced in the frequency with which football supporters' ecstatic and playful unison can end in violence. But if workers are drawn into struggle by a combination of need and hope, pulled into the rhythms and contradictions of the historical process with its volatile upturns and downturns, conceive of themselves as part of that history and form the radical need for community and universality, then they are to that extent inoculated against the paranoid, anti-social and vengeful passions of disaster nationalism.

Nor is it only in union organising that such radical needs may be formed. Anyone who has participated in a social movement of any depth and duration will have experienced adversity, defeats, betrayals and sacrifices and yet may still be able to say, as a former communist organiser told Vivian Gornick: 'I sacrificed *nothing*. I was doing what I wanted to be doing. They were great years, the best of my life, they gave me great meaning and focus, and nothing like that is ever gonna come my way again.'[25] It is in historical movement that consciousness is raised and democratic life is built.

For all that they are adroit at gaming attention and exploiting the media's preoccupations, on few of their agitating issues are disaster nationalists cutting with the grain of majority opinion. They appear larger than they are thanks to the long shadow cast by the glare of media attention. They depend substantially on the paralysis or tacit complicity of their opponents. They thrive on what Mark Fisher referred to as the 'consciousness deflation' of late capitalism, wherein the constant message of the system is that 'any positive state, any hope, is a dangerous illusion'. Or, to quote British home secretary Suella Braverman in polemic against liberals and the left, hopes amount to 'luxury beliefs'. The far right prospers, as do aficionados of the 'cultural Marxism' conspiracy theory like Braverman, on the internalised defeat and political timidity born of that deflationary politics. They succeed insofar as such defeat is institutionalised in the expressions of the electoral left, as it is in today's centre-left parties which anxiously tail the right on most major social questions.[26]

To defeat and marginalise the new far right, it is necessary first to decisively let go of the resignation that has characterised both the left and the labour movement for three decades. There are, in this direction, encouraging straws in the wind: a resurgence of a radical left in electoral terms, the resurfacing of class after all these years and militancy in the labour movement. These trends, representing significant cracks in a cold and oppressive consensus, show that disaster nationalists need not be the only ones to benefit from the crisis of liberalism.

V.

‘Fascism seems to come from the outside,’ Félix Guattari warned, ‘but it finds its energy right at the heart of everyone’s desire.’ Foucault likewise cautioned that the issue was the ‘fascism in us all … in our heads and in our everyday behavior, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us’.[27]

Before fascism becomes a movement, it must circulate in everyday life, in the nascent form of everyday paranoia and victimhood, fantasies of restitution and revenge, desire for domination, the authoritarian need to be right, the capacity to humiliate, approval-seeking ingroup conformity and converse tendencies towards malice and social sadism. These are the ordinary fascist *jouissances*, or microfascisms, that, when given an appropriate ideological shape, announce themselves loudly in moments of crisis.

Crises of capitalism are generally also crises of the left in its habitual modes of thinking and reproduction. And in the ‘diagonal’ politics of recent years, an assortment of declassé intellectuals and others from the left has flipped to a version of far-right politics. The axis of this transition has often been a perceived threat to the body and its relative freedom of movement, whether it is transgender rights threatening ‘women’s spaces’, or Covid interventions and vaccines crushing personal sovereignty. It would be comforting to say that the seeds of apostasy were evident all along, but that isn’t true. It would also be nice if we could put it down to the left unnecessarily alienating people through its neglect of issues that the right exploits, facile online censoriousness and reactive moral simplicity. That is a real issue, on which Naomi Klein is bracingly insightful in *Doppelganger*. But to blame it entirely on that would imply that the defectors were easily startled rabbits. The truth, I suspect, is closer to Guattari’s hunch, that the desire for fascism is a latent temptation from which no one is exempt. There may always prove to be attachments that matter more, not only than our most deeply held beliefs, but than our commitment to reality as such. In this sense, we might think of the ‘fascism in us all’ much as we were encouraged to see the Covid-19 virus: we might be contagious without knowing it.

There is a warning from history here, described in Alf Lüdtke’s essay asking of German workers under Nazism: ‘What Happened to the “Fiery Red Glow”?’ Lüdtke tracks the shock of Social Democrats and Communists in March 1933 as working-class neighbourhoods were decked out with

swastika flags and buzzing with approbation for the Führer. Some workers enlisted in the SA. Others kept their silence. Most workers did not go over to fascism, particularly those who had voted for the left. But fascism would not have been so comprehensive in its victory had it not aroused the latent longings of at least some of those workers.[28]

In detailing the emotional pathogens contributing to the disaster nationalist contagion, I have described resentments, hatreds and end-times yearnings to which we all might plausibly succumb. The 'horseshoe' theory of politics, according to which the 'extremes' are closer to one another than to liberalism, is trite. But it is obvious that the basic passions which drive the left can always, under pressure of sufficient despair and decay, in the atmospheric pall of defeat, be perverted and inverted into their fascist opposite.

Disaster nationalism is not yet fascist. But at its past zenith, it thundered along fixed rails towards total war, towards ecological cataclysm and human annihilation and towards the installation of that 'other kingdom' with its 'own peculiar fatality' that Buchenwald survivor David Rousset called the '*univers concentrationnaire*'.[29]

Notes

INTRODUCTION

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